

# 地獄の聖母

からいのセイモウ

奈須きのこ

the Garden of sinners 上



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# 空の 墳界

からきょうかい  
the Garden of sinners 上

## 奈須きのこ



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# **Empty Boundaries: Volume I**

**The Garden of Sinners**

**by Kinoko Nasu (奈須 きのこ)**

## **Stories By Kinoko Nasu**

### **Novels**

Empty Boundaries (空の境界) Series

Volume I: Panorama, The First Homicide Inquiry, Lingering Pain.

Volume II: A Hallow, Paradox Spiral

Volume III: Records in Oblivion, The Second Homicide Inquiry

Decoration Disorder Disconnection Series

Junk the Eater HandS

Angel Notes

Mage's Night (魔法使いの夜)

Ice Flowers (氷の花)

### **Visual Novels**

Tsukihime (月姫) Series

Tsukihime (月姫) Kagetsu Tōya (歌月十夜)

Fate/stay night Series

Fate/stay night Fate/hollow ataraxia

### **Video games**

Melty Blood

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# **Empty Boundaries: Volume I**

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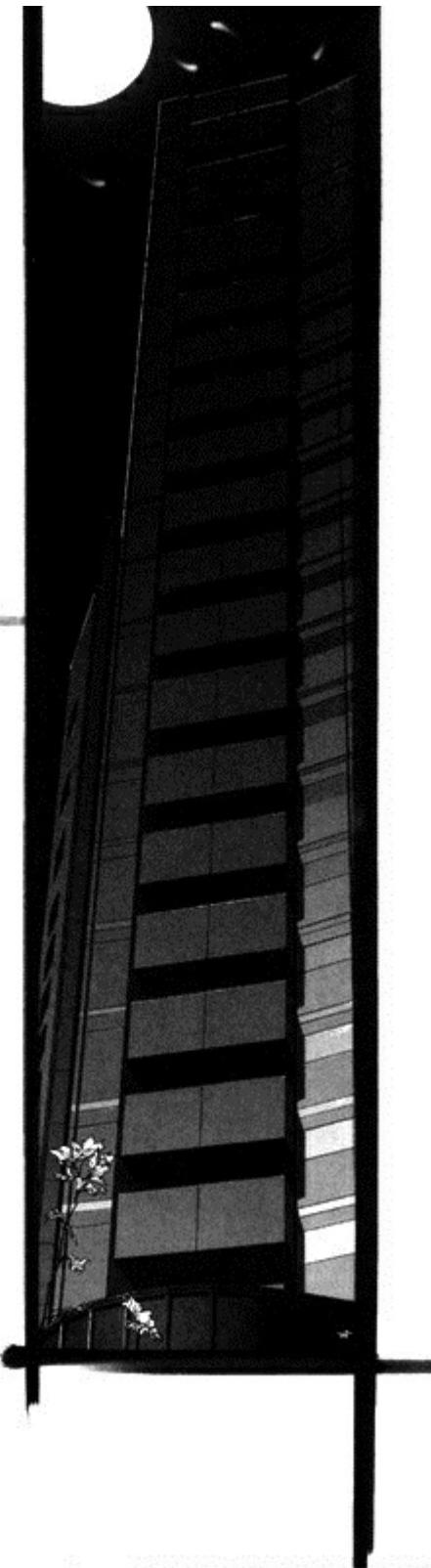
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# 1 Panorama

俯瞰風景

Chanatos.



## Panorama

That was the day when, led on by nothing except an impulse of curiosity, I took the main avenue on the way home. It wasn't a shortcut, and I didn't plan on passing by any particular place there. It was just something I decided to do on a whim.

This part of the avenue was full of skyscrapers and tall condos, some old, more of them new, while others were abandoned husks, all commingled into one crowded skyline. I'd wager everybody in the city, including me, was tired of looking at them day in and day out. While walking beside the buildings, I suddenly saw something fall from a roof to the concrete sidewalk some distance ahead of me.

It was a person.

In the moment that that person fell, I heard a sickening sound. The wet, raw sound you associate with the kind of things you don't want happening anywhere near you. The kind of sound you never really get to hear often. Judging from the height that the person fell from, it was clear that whoever he or she was died the instant it hit the pavement.

As I drew closer to the point of impact, I was able to scrutinize what happened more clearly. All that was left, all that my mind could take in, was the scarlet trail seeping slowly across the asphalt; the frail, bone-like limbs, and the long, black hair, which still retained some of its living beauty.

And that dead face.

The scene struck my mind with the image of a flower pressed between the

pages of an old, musty tome.

Perhaps because the corpse, with its neck twisted, looked like a broken lily to me.

# / 1

It is a night somewhere in the beginning of August, and Mikiya comes by to visit without any prior notice, as per his MO. Popping open the door, I see him standing idly in the hallway, facing the entrance like some sort of servant-in-waiting.

“Evening, Shiki. You look as lazy as ever,” he says, with a smile on his face. A strange greeting is just the kind of thing I expected him to do.

“Have you heard?” he continues. “There was another jumper today, actually. This time I was actually at the scene. There’ve been a lot of these incidents lately, but I never thought I would actually come across one.” He hands me a plastic convenience store bag. “Here, in the fridge.” He holds the bag, arm outstretched, while untying his shoes and talking to me. Mikiya is nothing if not a multi-tasker. Inside the bag were two cups of Haagen-Dazs strawberry ice cream. I guess he wants me to put them inside my fridge before they melt. While checking out the contents of the bag, Mikiya had already undone his laces and stepped inside.

My home is just a small apartment in a low-rise. The first thing you see on opening the front door is the small entryway, not even one meter long, where you take off your shoes. After going through that mess, you arrive at my one-stop bedroom-slash-living room, where Mikiya had already started making himself comfortable. I follow him in, glaring at his back while doing so.

“Shiki, you’ve been skipping class again, haven’t you? Your grades don’t really matter, but come on; you should at least attend your classes. Don’t tell me

you already forgot our promise to go to college together.”

“Wiser words were never before spoken,” I reply, feeling particularly caustic, “especially coming from someone who dropped college way before I did. And sadly, this promise we supposedly made ain’t ringing any bells.” “Don’t start being difficult again, Shiki.”

Mikiya tends to be a bit more blunt when you’ve got him cornered in a conversation; a helpful tidbit that has only recently come back to me. I climb on top of the bed and lie flat, Mikiya choosing to sit on the floor while leaning on the bed, his back facing me.

This young man named Mikiya Kokutō has been a friend to me since high school. At least that’s what my head tells me. My recollections have been a bit fuzzy lately.

We live in an age where fashion trends and the accompanying models that people want to look like are as apt to change as often as you blink in a day. A rarity, then, to still find someone like Mikiya, who steadfastly refuses to budge from his student-like appearance. He doesn’t dye his hair or have it grow into an unmanageable mess, he doesn’t tan his skin or wear accessories, he doesn’t carry a cellphone, and he doesn’t even allow himself the simple pleasures of flirting around with women. His demeanor struck me as the kind of person you’d probably see more ordinarily at lazy English train stations. His 170cm height, considerate disposition, and large, black rimmed glasses certainly complete the image. Not exactly someone you do a double-take on when you pass him by on the street, though it mostly due to his own fault: if he actually took the time to dress nicely instead of wearing somber black clothes every day, he might even be noticed.

“Shiki, are you listening? I met your mom today, too. She said you haven’t really contacted your family since you got out of the hospital two months ago. You should at least show your face at the Ryōgi estate, don’t you think?”

“Mmm?” I reply, as listlessly as Kokutō said I was. “I don’t really have any business being there, though.”

“Oh, come on, isn’t it about time you patched things up with your folks? It’s been two years after all, and you haven’t talked or met with them since.”

“There’s no use in making a pointless house call or a pointless conversation with them when it’ll only make us grow farther apart. It still isn’t real to me. Not so soon after getting out of the hospital. I mean, talking to you is still weird; what’ll happen if I talk to those strangers?” My patience with the subject grew thinner every second. I wish he would just stop pushing it. “Things aren’t going to get any better if it keeps up like this, you know. It isn’t right for you and your parents to be living so close to each other and not even talk.”

The sudden criticism makes me frown. What exactly is wrong with it? There’s nothing illegal going on between me and my parents. It’s just that I lost some of my memories in a traffic accident. We’re recognized as a family by the law and by our blood, so there really shouldn’t be anything to talk about here.

Mikiya always has his head in a worry about any damn person and their life issues, even though to me it seems like a wasteful exercise.

## Panorama - I

Shiki Ryōgi is my friend from high school. We studied together in a private school famous for putting a lot of its students on the fast track to a college education. On the day that I was looking for my name on the lists of people who had passed the entrance exam, I saw a name that caught my eye: “Shiki Ryōgi.” As names go, it was a pretty peculiar one, and our being classmates ensured that it would get stuck in my head. Ever since then, I’ve become possibly the only friend Shiki’s ever had.

Due to our school having no uniforms, and a casual clothing policy, a lot of people dressed in a multitude of ways to express themselves. Even in that sort of environment, Shiki stood out from the crowd.

Largely because of the kimono.

At first, that particular wardrobe choice made it seem as if the prime minister himself walked in on the classroom, forcing everyone to silence. But once it became clear that Shiki wasn’t sparing any words for anyone except the queries of the teachers, which were uncommon, people started to stop caring. Not that Shiki minded.

The cultivated air of inapproachability, intentional or not, certainly widened the distance more than the clothes already did, but Shiki’s features undoubtedly helped out in that regard as well.

Black hair framed Shiki’s face, as it does now; cut long enough to hide the ears. However, it was clear that the maintenance of it seemed to Shiki like it was time wasted, evidenced by how it looked like it was cut with reckless abandon.

Yet the cut was just at that height where people start to second guess Shiki's gender on first contact. More than anything though, it would be Shiki's eyes that lend your feet to stop. Those eyes carried a piercing gaze, seeming to bear witness to something invisible, something "other". To me, those eyes were a definition, synecdochic to character.

But then, the accident happened...

## / 2

“The jumpers.”

“Wha—oh, sorry, I wasn’t listening.” Mikiya cocks his head towards me a bit to listen.

“I said ‘the jumpers.’ As in the people who took a header on the sidewalk off a building. Would you say that what happened was accidental, Mikiya?” He shuts up for a moment and actually tries to think on the casual question seriously. He puts a hand on his chin, evoking the puzzled intensity of stumped detectives the world over.

“Well, it’s on the person who jumps if he really wanted to do that or not. As for how society will look at it, they do classify ‘falling from a high place’ as an accident so—”

“Not a murder, not exactly a suicide, and not exactly an accident either. That’s vague,” I muse. “I don’t know if it occurred to them that killing themselves would just inconvenience a lot more people than they thought it would. Maybe they should have grabbed a handbook on the subject and died a bit better.” As soon as I say that, I see Mikiya shake his head in disapproval.

“I guess I have to add ‘speaks ill of the departed’ to your already illustrious résumé of insensitivity.” He replies in monotone disappointment, almost without a note of chastisement. Typical.

“Ah, Kokutō. Ever the killjoy.” Despite my objection, he doesn’t even seem to care.

“Hah, that’s rare. It’s been a while since you called me by that name.” “That so?”

He nods like a squirrel. I tend to pronounce his surname a bit differently than you would normally, with a sort of French flavor; a small joke that originates way back in high school. I don’t really like the ring of the nickname though, so I stick with “Mikiya” for the most part, but sometimes I just blurt it out, like an involuntary emission of boredom or frustration. In the silence of my reverie, he suddenly claps his hands as if remembering something.

“Oh yeah, while we’re on the topic of rare things, I just remembered that my sister Azaka said she saw it too.”

“Saw what now?”

“The girl you said you saw floating around the Fujō Tower.”

Ah, yes, the Fujō Tower, former high-rise condominium situated in the commercial office district of town that used to serve as residence to the more privileged tax brackets, now abandoned and leaving people with little else save its husk and its memory. And a haunting, if what Kokutō says is true. Passing by it some days ago, I happened to see a spectral figure in that looked quite human. If Azaka saw it too, then it must mean it’s real.

My second sight, the ability to see these types of events, has its roots (as much as one can point out a definitive origin to this weirdness, at least) in one event, a point in time that feels simultaneously distant and recent. I was in a traffic accident two years ago, and because of that I spent those last two years in a coma. After waking from that coma, I began to...see things that weren’t there before. Tōko would say that what I’m doing isn’t so much “sight” as it is “perception.” In other words, it seems my senses have “awakened” to a higher level of perception, but it’s all technical magical gobbledegook that I couldn’t care less to understand.

“I did see it more than a few times, but I haven’t been there lately so I wouldn’t know if it’s still there,” I say, as I stretch out my arms.

“I don’t know why,” says Kokutō, perplexed, “but I pass by there all the time and I don’t see anything.”

“I’d say it’s because you have one extra pair of eyes too many,” I throw back at him.

“Erm, I don’t think glasses have anything to do with it.” Mikiya is always like this. He’s on a no-nonsense path and he’s going to stick to it come hell or high water. Honestly, I think it’s his naiveté that makes him not see these...”other” things. Nevertheless, these trifling incidents of people flying and falling seem to be set to continue. I can’t puzzle out the meaning behind it all, so I ask Mikiya a question.

“Mikiya, do you know the reason people fly?”

He gives a shrug. “Wouldn’t know. I mean, I’ve never tried flying before anyway,” he says with a yawn.

## / 3

It is a night approaching the end of August, and I decide to take a stroll. Despite summer quickly coming to a close, the air usually remained warm, which makes the chill running through the air tonight a rare and unusual event. The last train has come and gone, and a deathly silence has blanketed the city. This dead part of town is largely bereft of people, and looked like something foreign. Even the few pedestrians present seem fake, unnatural, like they were from some old daguerreotype. The whole thing reminds me of the scent of corpses, of grave pallor that stretched its damning influence across the city, as unstoppable and incurable as a terminal disease.

Everything—from the foreboding houses with no signs of life or light, to the dimly lit convenience store that offers little respite from the darkness—everything feels like all it takes is one bad moment to make them all fall down in violent upheaval.

The moon seems like the last refuge of life, even as my Eyes take in the richness of death in all things. This place is no exception, and my eyes hurt because of it. It's sickening.

I took a black leather jacket with me when I left the house, and now I wear it atop my light blue kimono. The kimono's sleeves get bunched up inside the jacket, and the heat warms my body. Even then, it still isn't hot. Well, not exactly. For me, it's more like it wasn't cold to begin with.

Even in such a deep night like this one, you can still encounter a few people making their way on the streets.

A man with the complete suit-tie-briefcase ensemble hurriedly making his way down the lane, his face cast downwards, features hidden by the shadows. A loiterer sitting by the light of the vending machine, his head swimming in the potent cocktail of alcohol and narcotics. Vagrants hanging around the vicinity of the 24-hour convenience store, maybe pondering how exactly they're going to bust it, or just trying to find safety in numbers.

Who knows what reason these people may find themselves out here in the middle of the night, walking dangerous streets? I don't even know my own reasons. I'm just doing what I used to do before.

...Two years ago.

In a different time, I was on the cusp of going into my second year of high school. But in that rain-soaked night, I was involved in an unfortunate traffic accident. I was brought to the hospital straightaway. Apparently, I didn't receive much in the way of bodily harm; few wounds, nothing serious, but nothing much beyond that. If it was really an accident, it was a pretty damn clean one, I'd say. On the other hand, peculiarly, I did receive serious damage to my brain, through which I lapsed into a deep coma. That's what they told me at least. That night is the only time I have trouble even recalling.

Because I had little serious physical injury, it wasn't a big stretch for the hospital to keep me alive, and my unconscious self grasped and groped for that last sliver of life. Statistically speaking, after 6 months, the chances of a coma patient coming back are pretty slim, but there are the aberrant cases, like myself. The doctors were so surprised at my recovery two months ago; it's as if they saw a corpse rising from the grave. Guess they never expected me to pull a Lazarus on them, which I guess clues me in to their close to zilch hopes on my case. Though perhaps not equaling their exaggerated reactions, I too had a surprise waiting for me.

My memories became...alien, foreign, like they were coming from the head of a different person. Put simply, I'm dissociated from the memories, unable to put stock in their validity. It was different than mere amnesia, or a lapse in memory.

As Tōko would say, there are apparently four systems or steps the brain uses with regards to handling memory: encoding, storage, retrieval, and recognition.

“Encoding” is writing your impressions of an experience as information in your brain.

“Storage” is actually keeping that impression or memory.

“Retrieval” is calling back that stored information, or in other words, remembering.

“Recognition” is confirming whether or not that information was the same as what actually happened.

If, in any one of these steps, there is some sort of failure, then you get memory disorder. Depending on which of these steps fail, you get very different cases of memory disorder. In my case, however, there isn’t a problem with any of these steps. Though I can’t place my memories as my own, “recognition” is working because I can identify my memories as my previous experiences.

Even then, I still couldn’t trust these memories. I had no real feeling that I am the Shiki Ryōgi that was. Perhaps it was some other Shiki Ryōgi, some other high school student, some other person who had an accident. But I’ve seen the documents; I *am* Shiki Ryōgi. At least that’s what my brain tells me

Two years of oblivion have reduced me, if not to emptiness, than to something that sits closely beside it. It laid waste all that I was inside, and severed what connection existed between my memory and personality through two years of “living” like a shell, on the boundary of emptiness. And though there was precious little drama here compared to actual societal rejection, it drives me to worry all the same. All my memories are just reflections on the water, and I don’t know whether I’m the reflection or the real thing. With these memories, I know how to act like the Shiki Ryōgi that my parents and friends knew, but I know it best; it’s all just an act, just mimesis. It’s like being a newborn baby: not knowing anything and lacking any sort of world experience. Or possibly it’s more like not living at all.

Still, the memories do help. I mean, they make me into a functional human being, after all. I already have the emotions people have from experiencing something. It’s not real, hands-on experience or anything, but at least it’s there. It results in this weird feeling where if I do something, I feel like it’s my first time doing it and also feel like I’ve done it a hundred times before. There’s no

amazement, like a magic trick where you can see the strings in the sleeve.

And so I continue to play out this strange role. The reason is quite simple.

Because by doing so, maybe I can return to some semblance of the past.

Because by doing so, maybe I can figure out why I like walking so late at night.

I guess, in a way, you could say I've fallen in love with my previous self.

I try to get my bearings in the neighborhood, and I realize I've walked pretty far, enough to reach the office district of the city. Buildings that stood at heights almost similar to each other lined the street, looking like soldiers arranged in neat little firing ranks. The surface of these buildings are riddled with little glass windows, themselves in their own arrangement. The reflection of moonlight as well as of the other buildings borne atop their shining surfaces creates a sort of shadow world, where monsters and their kind lurked.

One shadow stands taller than the rest, however. Like a perverse monument, it stands long and narrow, with a height that looked like it could reach the moon.

The Fujō Tower.

No lights or signs of life are present in that building. Seeing as how it's two o'clock in the morning, I really shouldn't be surprised. The coldness of the still night is irregular at this time of summer. The bone in my nape creaks from the cold, despite the lack of any tangible feeling of a breeze. I decide that it's just my imagination. As I looked up at the towering structure, a black shape flits past my sight, almost unnoticeable because of the lack of light. Looking closer, I realize it's a shadow of a human figure, and then I realize it's not a shadow at all. The silhouette of a woman comes floating into view atop the building. I didn't mean that as a turn of phrase though. She literally is floating.

"Hmph, so you've shown yourself today as well, I see." I say.

I don't like her up there, silhouetted against the moonlight. But I can hardly do anything about what I can see. And as quickly as I saw her, she vanishes, flying as if the moon was her cradle.

## **Panorama - II**

I see a dragonfly, beating its wings.

A butterfly follows it, but its pace doesn't slacken. The butterfly tries to keep up with the dragonfly, but it is a futile effort. As it flies further, I see a glimpse of the butterfly as its strength failed and gravity took hold. It makes an arc as it falls, and then trails its way to the ground like a snake, or a broken lily. A sad and cruel scene.

Perhaps, even if they could not travel together, they could have kept each other company for a while longer. But I knew that was impossible. To something like the dragonfly, whose feet don't touch the earth, even such freedom was denied.

I hear the distinct buzz of conversation, and I wake up.

My eyelids were screaming for two more hours of sleep, even as my mind warred between sleeping and waking. In the end, the battle was won by the latter, and I set to work on the laborious task of opening my eyelids. Sometimes, I wonder if I worry about these things too much. I was up all night working on the blueprints and diagrams, and I must have fallen asleep in Miss Tōko's room. I raise myself up from the sofa with a hint of enthusiasm, pushing up my glasses so I could see better, and I realize that this was indeed the office.

The office was a cluttered place full of occult oddities and research that Miss Tōko had accumulated throughout the years. The midday sunlight illuminated this mess, as well as the two people conversing; Shiki, wearing a smooth kimono as always, was leaning with back to the wall, and Miss Tōko was sitting cross-legged on a chair.

Miss Tōko always dressed smart, with thin black pants and a collared white blouse that seemed to look new every time you meet her. Combined with her short hair and the way it made her neck show, it gave her the image of a company secretary, though I thought that with her scary, piercing look, especially if she didn't have her glasses on, it would probably be impossible that she would ever get such a job.

“Morning, Kokutō.” Miss Tōko gave a glance in my direction, like she always does, to acknowledge my presence. No glasses were worn over her hawk eyed glare today, a sign that she and Shiki were probably talking business.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I guess I fell asleep.”

“Don’t start with excuses. I can see well enough. If you’re fully with us on planet Earth now, then go make something to drink. A cup of coffee would be good. It should warm your bones a bit after that long rest.” Long rest? Well, I did feel exceptionally tired, so it wasn’t a completely strange thing to say. I don’t know why Miss Tōko would say it, but she’s always talking cryptically at the best of times anyway, so not asking her has become the standard operating procedure.

“How about you, Shiki? Need a drink?” I managed to ask in my groggy state, only half aware of my surroundings.

“Nah, I’m good. I’m about to hit the sack soon, anyway.”

Lazy eyes and sagging shoulders tell the story of Shiki’s sleeplessness well enough. Probably went and did another one of those nightly strolls again last night.

Next to Miss Tōko’s office room was another one that served the purposes of a kitchen, at least to her. To me, it looked more like a laboratory, or at the very least it used to look like one. The sink had three faucets in a row, just like you’d see in a lab. Two of those had wires strapped around them, either disabled or possessing some unearthly, forbidden function , the operation of which I suspect only passed between God and Miss Tōko. God sure wasn’t revealing anything, and Miss Tōko is of the same mindset, and I was in no particular rush to find out. Either way, it gave the entire room a disturbing air.

I turn on the coffee maker, and it emits a low hum as it processes the drink. The first thing I do upon arriving here every day is make coffee for Miss Tōko, so it's come to the point where I could do it with my eyes closed. It's been almost half a year since I've started working for her. "Work" in this case being a very loose term. This place could hardly be called your typical office environment. Despite that, I stay on, probably because I saw something in what she worked on.

Just after Shiki lapsed into a coma, I graduated high school and entered college with no motivation or any particular purpose. At some point back in our high school days, me and Shiki made a deal to go to college together. Even if Shiki had no hope of waking up, I still wanted to keep that promise. But my life after Shiki's coma was one of aimless drifting, just watching the calendar as the days swept past.

One day I was invited by an acquaintance to a doll and puppet exhibit, and it was there that I found it: A doll in the shape and size of a human, so finely made that it must have taken its craftsman years of hard work; some measure of his soul went into that doll. Though I knew it was just a doll like anything else there, it looked more like a human being, frozen in place, and one I was sure would move any second now, if someone breathed into it. A thing on the brink of existence, but didn't live, preserved on the boundary that no one else walked.

I was attracted to that contradiction, maybe because it reminded me so much of the person that Shiki was before. Apparently, the maker of the doll was unknown. Even the pamphlet of the exhibit didn't mention any names. I dove into investigation, desperately seeking the person who could craft such a beautiful doll. It turned out to be someone not entirely connected to the business of doll making, and did it with no real intent for fame. A mysterious recluse named Tōko Aozaki.

Apparently she makes dolls as her main occupation, but was also an architect on the side. She seemed to be involved in just generally "making" things, whatever those things may be, but she never accepts requests. Mysteriously, she just knows who needs things made, goes to them, announces her intent, and proceeds to make whatever it is they want after receiving a generous advance payment.

She must be the world's greatest freelance craftsman, or the world's biggest weirdo.

I got even more interested in finding her after that, even though I got a sense that I really should have quit at that point. Something seemed to pull at my effort, almost as if she didn't want to be found out. Eventually, through much time and record searching, I found out she lived in some place away from the city, not in the suburbs, or the industrial district. It wasn't even a house.

It's an abandoned building.

Well, to be more specific, it's a building where construction was stopped when it was halfway done, probably because whoever funded it ran out of money. It has the shape of a building, seen from afar, but inside the floor and walls are bare. It was left as it was, neglected and surrendered to time and the weather. Had it been completed, it would have had six floors, but there's nothing above the fourth floor. Nowadays it would be more efficient to start the bulk of the construction from the top, but I guess they were still using the old methods back then. Now the fifth floor has been dragooned into the service of a roof. Though surrounded by a high concrete wall, anyone who wanted to go in would have an easy time of it, since the gate was always open. It's a miracle the local kids don't mess around in it. They probably just see it as some suspicious, dangerous building they should stay out of. Pretty convenient.

I don't know if Miss Tōko really bought the building, but it seems that way, so for now, she stays here. The laboratory-slash-coffee room I'm in right now is situated on the fourth floor, and the second and third are Miss Tōko's various offices, storage rooms, and workshops, so we usually talk shop on the fourth floor.

After finding Miss Tōko, I got to know her and asked for employment of some sort, just to sate my interest in this master craftswoman. I quit college, and started working for her. And amazingly enough, I actually get paid. She once said to me that humans can be divided into two types with two attributes: those who craft and search, and those who use and destroy. She made it clear to me that I wasn't someone who "crafted" but one who "searched" or some such, and that's why she hired me.

“Running a little late there, Kokutō,” said an accusatory voice from the other room. It was Miss Tōko, her patience obviously running thin. Well, the coffee maker’s just about done, and the black liquid sits there, waiting to be drunk.

“Yesterday makes the eighth,” Miss Tōko says abruptly, while stubbing out her cigarette. “Soon people are going to take notice of their connection.”

She is, of course, talking about the recent case of high school girls falling to their deaths. There’s nothing else to talk about anyway, so I guess this was as good a topic as any. But wait...eight?

“Huh? Weren’t there only six people?”

“A few more popped up while you still had sand in your eyes. All this started in June, and it’s been going at about three per month. Maybe another one’ll happen before the next three days are out, eh?” Miss Tōko is in the habit of saying really ominous things, so I’m kind of used to it. I take a quick glance at the calendar, noticing that there’s only three days left in August. For a moment, a flash of worry enters my mind for some reason, but I quickly dismiss it.

“They’re saying the suicides have no relation, though,” I remark. “Different schools, no friends of the third degree or anything like that. It could still turn out that the police are withholding information from the media to better their chances when they interview the perp...if this case even has one.”

“What, Kokutō, you don’t trust the police on this one? That sleep must have really done a number on you to suddenly be skeptical of people like that.” She grins. As usual, her spite knows no bounds when her glasses are off.

“Because they didn’t leave behind a suicide note, right?” I explain. “Suicides usually leave behind a note or some sort of last message to the living. I mean, what is it six...erm, eight people now? At least one of them should have done it. That only means one of two things: that the police aren’t publicizing the note so that it serves as leverage against a suspect, or it could mean a statistical improbability.”

“Which by itself becomes the only thing connecting these incidents,” says Miss Tōko. “The girls weren’t taking drugs, nor were they members of some

weird cult. By all accounts their lives were perfectly mundane. Neither their family nor their friends know any reason why they would throw themselves off a building. So it follows that they probably killed themselves over some emotional or psychological distress, or perhaps to prove something. That's why they don't leave behind any last words."

"So you're saying that it's not that the police are hiding anything, it's that they truly didn't have any suicide note?" I ask.

"Well, statistically speaking, most people don't leave behind any note when they commit suicide...but yeah." Miss Tōko leans back on her chair, sipping her coffee while looking at me funny. I put a mug to my own lip and tip it, tasting the bitter coffee inside. I think back on what she said, something nagging me in the reasoning.

How could there be no suicide note? It didn't fit. The girls were, as far as we knew, all happy and content, very much attached to the world of the living. In a situation where one is forced to die, final words are what you leave behind to cement that connection. Not doing so means you have nothing to leave to this world, and you can decide to bravely face that great unknown of death. A suicide without a note, or parting words, or even the remote chance of discovery of the incident: that would be the perfect suicide.

Jumping off a building, then, is far from the perfect suicide.

Such an exhibitionist act makes the suicide clear and attention-grabbing. In a way, the suicide and the resulting publicity itself results in having the air of a "suicide note", so to speak. If the suicidals picked as obvious and public a method as jumping off a building, then they did so knowing they would be seen by many. Publicity formed at least a part of their choice of death. In that case, why the lack of parting words at all?

I can think of only one reason. Perhaps, like Shiki said once, they were just accidents, or at the very least, they did not intend to die. Then they wouldn't have any reason to write a suicide note, just like running into a traffic accident while going home from school. Unfortunately, I can't fathom why you'd jump off from a building while taking your daily commute from school, though.

"There won't be any more girls hitting the pavement for a while after the

eighth, ‘least not ones related to these incidents.’” Shiki, now standing beside the window, joins the conversation.

“How could you possibly know that?” I say.

“How else? I checked. There were eight of them floating around that building. I took care of ‘em, but they’ll be there for a little while longer, even if it does make me sick.” Shiki faces away from the window, posing with arms crossed. “Say, Tōko, do all people end up flying that way when they bite the bullet?”

“No one really knows for sure. Everyone’s different. All I can offer you is an observation.” Miss Tōko puts down her cup, her smile morphing into a more scholarly demeanor, as if she was about to teach the most important thing in the world. “The words ‘flying’ and ‘falling’ are inextricably tied to each other, because we humans can’t fly by ourselves. And yet, as expected of men, the more we reach for the sky, the more we forget this. Even those who live after death can try and reach for this goal, to fall towards the sky, forgetting that it is the hubris of Icarus that led to his doom.”

Shiki seemed perturbed by Miss Tōko’s cryptic response, more so than usual. I can only guess as to what offensive statement Miss Tōko said that has Shiki in such a defensive attitude. I decide to break the mood.

“Er, I’m sorry ma’am, but I can’t seem to understand the topic.” “Apologies, Kokutō. We’re talking about the ghost at the Fujō Tower. I don’t really know if it’s the real thing or just some mage’s illusion. I wanted to check, but if Shiki really killed it, then there’s no way to know for sure now.”

So it was about that. The conversations between Shiki and glasses-off Miss Tōko are always about the occult and the magical, so it wasn’t that hard to guess anyway.

“You know that Shiki saw those girls floating around in the Fujō Tower, correct? Turns out there was another human figure flying around among those floating girls. Since they couldn’t be removed, we figured perhaps that place was something akin to a net to them, or something along those lines.”

In my mind, I am frowning at this story’s sudden turn for the complex, and then, as if sensing my confusion, she offers her layman’s summary of it. “Well, to put it a bit more simply, there is one girl floating around that building, and

tagging along with her are what looks like our famous suicide girls. I suspect that they're something like ghosts or some other supernatural occurrence. The end."

I nod my understanding, but the way Shiki put it, I gather that the deed was already done and taken care of. Once again, the story seems far past me. It's only been three months since I let these two get to know each other, but already I'm the one lagging behind on their peculiar conversations. Not that I had any particular interest in being involved in them either way. However, since being ignored was also an unacceptable outcome, I listen anyway. The way I'm stuck between their stranger world and my own willing or unwilling ignorance of it sort of fits me, in a way. It's one of those small blessings I can be thankful for.

"That sounds like a story out of a dime novel," I blurt out. Miss Tōko nods her agreement, smiling. Shiki, on the other hand, is somehow growing more wound up, casting accusatory sidelong glances at me. Because provoking a reaction out of Shiki works about as often as Mercury in retrograde, I have to wonder if I did something colossally idiotic without my knowing again.

"But then, Shiki saw the ghosts only at the beginning of July, right?" I sound dumb for asking the obvious, but I do it just to confirm. "So there were only four ghosts back then, Shiki?"

A negative shaking of the head from Shiki. "No, no, there were eight, right from the start. I told you right? There wouldn't be any more suicides after the eighth. In their case, the order is reversed."

"Uh huh. You gotta clarify with me whether or not you've gained any future predicting powers like that one girl we talked to some time ago." "It's not like that, Mikiya. It's more like that place...the air there isn't normal. How do I put this?" Shiki's voice uncharacteristically wavers a bit as a proper description fails to materialize. "It's sort of like a strange sensation of being in the middle of boiling water and freezing water."

As Shiki struggles with vocabulary, Miss Tōko steps in to help.

"It means that time there flows differently. Understand that there is more than one way for time to progress. The speed upon which entropy acts on something differs for each object. The same holds true for our memories. When a person

dies, the record of him existing doesn't disappear instantly. There are people who remember, people who have observed and watched over his life and death. As long as these exist, the memories..., or rather, their record of existence, doesn't suddenly disappear, but only fades into nothingness. If the observer of death was not a person, but instead a place that resonates to people such as those girls, then they will remain even after death as a sort of image, of wandering 'ghosts', or what have you. The only ones receptive to this image are the ones that share and keep the memory of these ghosts, such as close friends and family. And people like Shiki and me, of course."

Miss Tōko lights another cigarette before continuing. "Entropy acts on memory too. People forget, and eventually the memories disappear. But on the roof of the Fujō Tower, the entropy of those memories are slower, as if the building itself doesn't want to forsake them. The record of their time alive hasn't caught up to their current state, and as a result, the memories, and the images of those girls remain, in that place where time is crooked and broken."

Miss Tōko seems to finish her explanation, which I suspect managed to be even more puzzling than what Shiki would have eventually gotten to. So what she's saying is that, when something dies or is lost, that thing doesn't truly disappear, as long as someone remembers it. And that remembering it is to acknowledge its existence, and because of that, it can sometimes be seen again. That just sounds like deluding yourself.

Well, Miss Tōko probably kept using the word "image" because it is something of a delusion, a thing that can't be real.

In a surprisingly frank display of annoyance, Shiki is led to that timeless impulse of headscratching. "Enough of these explanations, already. What I'm really worried about is her. My knife did a pretty good job of proving my point, but if there's actually some mage using projection, then this'll never end." Another soild glance comes my way. "I'm tired of being Mikiya's guardian, thank you very much."

"I agree completely, Shiki. I'll settle things with Kirie Fujō, so just go on and take Kokutō home...wait, he still has five hours to clock in, so you might want to sleep. You can use that place."

Miss Tōko pointed to a spot on the floor that looks like it hasn't been cleaned for at least half a year, littered with paper like a dirty furnace. Shiki, naturally, ignores her.

"So what was she, anyway?" Shiki asks Miss Tōko. The mage walks over to the window and stares outside, her footsteps inaudible, and with a cigarette still in her mouth. We don't really have any light in this room, not electric light anyway. All the light comes from outside, and in certain areas of the building where the sun doesn't reach, it can be surprisingly difficult to tell the time. In contrast, the view outside is clearly morning, perhaps somewhere closer to noon. For a few moments, Miss Tōko stares silently at the sun-bathed panorama.

"Before, you could have said that she flew." She puffs out a cloud of smoke, indistinguishable now from the white sunlight. From my position, framed by the sunlight and smoke, she looked like some sort of mirage. "Kokutō, what would you associate with a high place? What imagery comes to mind?" The sudden question snaps me back into focus. The only thing I could think about was the time I went atop Tokyo Tower. I remember trying real hard to spot my house, but in the end I couldn't make it out among the many tall buildings I saw.

"Maybe...small things?"

"Trying a bit too hard there, Kokutō."

Well, fine, I didn't think that answer through too much anyway. I try to think of something else.

"Well, I can't really think of anything in particular, but I do think that a panoramic view is beautiful. Just the sight of the scenery is overwhelming." This was a more spontaneous response, which she somehow seems to note, acknowledging it with a little nod while still staring at the window. And like that, she continued to talk.

"Scenery seen from select vantage points is always wonderful. Even an otherwise mundane landscape becomes something special. Looking down at the world you live in, though, stimulates a different urge. In such a commanding view, there is but one impulse."

As the word "impulse" leaves her mouth, she cuts off her sentence.

An impulse isn't something that comes from reason or intelligence, not something that comes from within, but something that is triggered by an external force, even if one rejects it. Like a murderous, destructive urge. Then what is the destructive impulse that a view from on high brings?

"It's how far everything is. A view too wide makes clear the boundary between you and the world. People can only rest easy with things they are familiar with. Even with an accurate map telling you your exact location, you know that's only information. To us, the world only amounts to something we understand and feel from experience. The boundaries and connections of the world, and of countries, and of cities, are only constructs of the mind, not something we feel ourselves. But with a view too wide, there appear gaps in our understanding. You have a ten meter radius that you feel, and the ten kilometer space that you're looking down on. They're both one and the same, the same world that you've been living in, and yet the first one feels more real.

You see, now we have come upon a paradox. Rather than recognize the small world you can feel as the world you live in, you ascribe it to the wide world you can only see. But within this wide world, you cannot feel that you truly exist. Because the closer objects are to your person, the more sure you can be of their existence, of their reality. In this way, reason, represented by your knowledge, and experience, represented by instinct, will start to conflict. Eventually, one will lose, and confusion sets in.

*'Viewing the city from up here sure puts it into perspective. I can't believe my house was down there. Did the park always look that way? I didn't even know that street or that alley or that building ever existed! This is a city I've never seen before, like I've gone far, far away.'* Those are the sort of thoughts that run through your head in a panoramic view."

In a lull in her speech, I manage to sneak in a question which has been nagging me since the start.

"So, what, looking out from a vantage point is somehow bad now?" "Only if you gaze for too long. Remember that in the old myths, traveling the sky was akin to traveling another world. To fly was to ascend to a higher world, or perhaps to meet one's final reward in the afterlife. Mortals who ascended the skies became mad, unless they armed themselves with charms or the power of

reason. And always, lunacy was cured by returning to solid ground.”

Now that she mentions it, I did have this indescribable urge to jump from the school roof once, just to see what would happen if I did. It must run through everybody’s minds at some point, when looking at that view. Of course, I didn’t really want to do it, but why did I think that way when it clearly leads to my own death? Why do other people think that way? “Does that mean that, if only for a moment, you go mad?” After I mention the question, Miss Tōko bursts into laughter.

“Kokutō, you have to understand that thinking that is normal. Dig into people’s dreams and you find them dreaming the taboo, eventually. We possess the extraordinary ability of indulging our own fantasies with our own imagination. Though you are right in a way. What’s important is that we know that the fantasy has its place. Well, I guess that’s obvious. But in your example, it’s less ‘crazy’ and more like a ‘numbing of thought.’”

“Tōko, this has gone on long enough.” Shiki interrupts, sick of the onesided conversation. Well, we *have* drifted quite far from the main topic so it wouldn’t be uncalled for in this case.

“There’s nothing long about it. In fact, were this an actual thought experiment, we’d only be ankle deep into it.”

“Well, cut it down to a phrase, will you? When you and Mikiya talk, it’s like a goddamn thesis committee.”

Strong words, but words which I can accept have an all too valid point. “Shiki...” Miss Tōko starts, rubbing her temple in frustration, but Shiki continues to complain, ignoring the both of us.

“And then there’s this business of views from high places. I hope you remember that just by walking around, we’re already ‘viewing from a high place’ already.” Air quotations by Shiki. “There’s no ‘normal view’ by your logic.”

Well, someone’s wound up. As expected, Shiki’s already trying to punch holes in Miss Tōko’s argument. Certainly, a person’s eyes are higher than the ground, which would qualify them for a “high place”, I guess. Miss Tōko nods in approval at Shiki, and continues her speech, probably condensed now for the

sake of Shiki's temper.

"Even if we count the fact that the ground isn't actually flat but at an angle, we also don't usually call our normal vision to be a 'commanding' or 'overlooking' view. There's a reason for that. Your vision isn't exactly as your eyes see it, but something more of a signal the mind interprets and comprehends. Protected as we are by our 'common sense', we don't perceive such sight as 'high', and we don't call it such. It's 'normal'...whatever nebulous value anyone might ascribe to that word."

Our mental perceptions, on the other hand, also stand perched on its own vantage point. Different minds perceive different things, but all are imprisoned, asleep in a paradigm of material reality. Awakened minds bearing a more malleable paradigm, such as those of mages, can bend its rules, but never truly break them. To cross that boundary is to become something more and less human. A god, but absent the restraint. And so Hypnos becomes Thanatos."

As she says this, Miss Tōko continues to look out at the window, in a commanding view of the street, the town—perhaps the world. She's looking at the world with her feet firmly in the ground, which I thought was important for some reason. I suddenly remember my dream.

Before it ended, I remember the butterfly fell towards the ground. Were the butterfly not so intent to follow me, she could have flown more gracefully. If she had just floated and not flapped her wings so hard, she could have flown longer. But perhaps, seeing the dragonfly and how it flew, it could no longer bear to just float. That's why it flew.

Miss Tōko threw her expended cigarette out the window. "The fluctuation at the Fujō Tower might have been her perception of the world. The uneasiness in the air that Shiki felt were the bars of the prison. A place steeped in numina."

A few seconds pass without Miss Tōko saying a word, which Shiki and I take as a sign that she's finally finished talking. The long sigh and wandering eyes tell me that Shiki's melancholic demeanor calms down at last. "Bars of the prison, huh? I wonder if that girl was inside or outside." Saying this dismissively, Shiki's head is tilted to one side, tired of talking.

"Well, I'd say wherever you are, she's on the opposite side," counters Miss

Tōko.

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It's 2:00 in the morning, and the bone in my nape creaks from the cold. I shiver in spite of myself, and I wonder if it's the chill that's doing it, or my own mind. For the moment, I cast aside my reservations and enter the Fujō Tower, no sight or sound of life indicating any sort of welcome for me. Only the electric light illuminating the cream-colored walls of the entrance hallway, a light that looked too artificial and lacking in human warmth that it ended up being more eerie than the darkness it was supposed to sweep away. At the entrance lies a card checker for the former tenants, now unused and broken. Without stopping, I pass by it, going through the hallway and into an elevator. The situation is the same as it looked outside: no people except for me. The elevator has one of those mirrors that people can use to ogle themselves while they wait. It reflects a person wearing a light blue kimono with a black leather jacket, with the lazy eyes of someone tired of doing this job.

I press the button that leads to the rooftop while looking at my reflection in the mirror. With nothing but the low hum of the elevator accompanying me, I wait as the world begins to rise.

For now until this mechanical box reaches the rooftop, this elevator is a prison. The events of the outside are from an entirely different world, an entirely different existence. For now, this is all that is real. I allow this thought to slip into my mind unbidden, though I should be focusing on the task at hand.

The sliding door opens with only the slightest hint of a sound, leading into a small storage room whose only feature is the door leading outside to the rooftop. The room has this oppressive lack of light that makes me think that the door to

the roof opens to that different world I fleetingly felt, the world that I saw in the reflective circus of the buildings' windows. It's a boundary of emptiness. Crossing the room with my footsteps resounding against the narrow space, I open the door.

The room is black as pitch, but it melds into the now visible void of the endless night sky. My eyes take in the view of the city from on high. There was nothing special about the Fujō Tower. It had a perfectly constructed and level floor made of concrete, and a chain-link fence surrounding the roof. Aside from the water tank that stood atop the room I just exited out of, there isn't anything else here. Except for the view.

The height is at least ten stories higher than any building in the vicinity, giving it a lonely feeling. It's like being on top of a tall ladder, staring down into the depths of the world below you. If the world below were the ocean, then the scattered lights of buildings would be the anglerfish, the only lights in an otherwise black world where neither sunlight nor moonlight reach. A beautiful sight.

The world is sleeping, perhaps for eternity, but unfortunately only for the moment. The stillness grips my heart tighter than any cold wind, and it feels painful. Stars glitter in the sky like jewels, and the moon is out, brighter than anything. In my education at the family manor, I was taught that the moon was not the sun's mirror, but a window to a different reality. A polar opposite to stand as a gate to twilight.

The moon has long been associated with the arcane, femininity, and death. And as that moon shines brightly over our world, the figure of a woman floats eerily in the sky above, silhouetted harshly against the moonlight, accompanied by eight girls flying around her.

The floating woman specter is wearing a white cloth that looked like it could pass for a dress, and she has black hair that reaches down all the way to her waist. What little you can see of her arms and legs through the cloth reveal how slender she is. Her eyebrows, too, follow this mold, and her eyes hold inside them piercing cold, making her countenance one of the most beautiful I've seen.

From her looks, I'd say she's in her early twenties, though it's probably foolish to attach anything like "age" to something like a ghost. And yet she doesn't possess the distorted air of a ghost that marks them so well. She looks as if she could pass muster for being alive. The girls swimming in the air around her, who fade in and out of sight, look more the part. Above me, this lonely procession continued; the womanly figure, and the girls floating in a protective formation. I found it unsettling, not so much repulsive, but more like...

"I see. This is all a spell of yours, isn't it?" I sneer.

I didn't notice it before now, but I note the woman's face again, seeing some inhuman quality to its beauty. Were the wind blowing strongly tonight, her smooth black hair, each strand finely combed, would strike an otherworldly chord in anyone's heart. Otherworldly, and inhuman. "Then I'm gonna have to kill you."

As if noticing me for the first time, the woman's eyes finally cast downward, and I return the favor, our eyes taking in each other's measure. No more words are spoken. None are needed.

From inside my jacket, I draw a blade, a fine weapon seven inches in length.

The woman's gaze from above fills me with the urge to kill. The beautiful white dress sways in the air. The slender arm moves like water, and points an accusatory finger at me. Those slender limbs no longer seem beautiful, and look more fragile now.

"Like a bone, or a lily."

Tonight, there was no wind, and my voice reverberated in the night sky.

*You can fly.* When the woman points her finger at me, I hear a voice intruding in my consciousness; perhaps hers, were she able to speak. It buries itself inside, digging in, and telling me I can fly. The mental assault makes me lose balance for a moment, but with only one step I regain composure. Overhead, the woman hesitates. Now I see.

*You must fly.* She tries again, this time stronger, more assertive. It is met with similar resistance. And then, finally, *finally*, my Eyes look at her. And there they are. One on each leg, one on her back, a little one in her left chest. I can see the

lines, separating her body into little sections. The one in her chest is likely the best target. Hitting that'd mean instant death. This woman could be some sort of image, some delusion, or a ghost. But in the end it doesn't matter. Because with my Eyes, even gods can die. Holding my knife in a reverse grip, edge-out, I raise my right hand, narrowing my gaze at my enemy while doing so. But she attacks me again.

*I can fly. I can fly. I loved the sky since I was a child. I flew yesterday too. I can fly higher today. Freely. Peacefully. Smiling. I have to go quickly. To where? To the sky? To freedom? Let's escape from reality! Yearn for the sky! Fight gravity. Be restless enough not to stay in one place. Fly unconsciously. Let's go. Let's go.*

*GO!*

“You gotta be fucking kidding, right?”

I raise my free left hand. The mental suggestion doesn't work. I don't even lose my balance anymore.

“Can't seem to take a liking to flying. Don't know how to feel alive— been that way for a while—so I don't know the pain of living. To be honest, I don't really give a damn about you,” I murmur, almost singing it. It's true though. Joy and sorrow, freedom and restraint; I can't feel any of them. That's why I can't see this fuss about being liberated from pain.

“But taking him was a big mistake. Finders keepers, and I found him first. You're going to give him back.”

My left hand grabs the air like a rope, and I pull back. The woman and the other girls are pulled towards me, like a fisherman plucking a good catch.

The woman's expression changes. She tries her last, vain hope of controlling me, trying her best to put as much power into her suggestion.

*FALL!*

And again, I disregard it completely. With all the firmness in my voice I can muster, I answer her back.

*“You fall.”*

As she comes toward me, I plunge the knife deep into her chest, as naturally as I do stabbing a fruit, and so exquisitely performed that it gives even the victim pause for admiration. The knife runs from front to back, clean through her.

She doesn't bleed. Unable to move from the shock of being stabbed straight through, she convulses just once. With only a nudge and a slight movement of my right arm, I fling away the useless “corpse”, and the incorporeal body slips through the fence without a sound into the shining city below. Her hair still lies motionless, and her dress embraces the darkness, a white flower sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

And with that, I depart from the roof, the ghosts still floating in the air behind me.

With the impact of steel lightning on my chest, I awaken.

It was a staggering attack, one that proved how strong my opponent was, if one can drive through a person's chest that easily. But it wasn't a strike born out of anger, or desperation. A singular thrust delivered with no wasted energy, one that would slide easily in between bone and sinew.

It wasn't the pain that hurt me. Rather, it was the feeling of me being ripped apart, and the sound of the knife plunging deep, deep into my heart. That incomparably bittersweet fear. My body shook and trembled at the thought of it. My silent weeping contained my uneasiness, my loneliness, my will to live. My tears aren't from the pain either, or from the fear of the encounter. It was for the brush of death that I had never before experienced, but had now fallen in love with, even though I pray every night for the strength to live.

I hear the distinct sound of the door opening, a sound that I have grown very familiar with. Even though I know it's nighttime, the far off glow of the buildings in the city induces the same sensation as sunlight. It's not yet time for my regular examination, so the person who came must be a visitor. I have a private room, so I'm almost always alone. My sole company here is the bed, the cream colored curtain which never flutters in the wind, and the lights from the outside world, ghostly yet radiant.

"Excuse me. You would be Kirie Fujō, correct?" Even her deep voice can't mask that the visitor is a woman. After greeting me, she goes to my bedside, ignoring the chair and choosing instead to stare down at me coldly. A frightening

person, one who I feel can destroy me with a snap of her fingers if she so wished. Yet, in my heart, I still feel happy. It's been many years since I had any sort of visitor. I couldn't turn her away, even if she is Death herself come to take me.

"And you are the enemy, correct?" I reply. The woman nods. Perhaps it may just be the light from the faint shining beacons of the city, but when I try to focus my vision on the visitor, I can barely see her. Her clothes are without blemish, reminding me of the neatness of a school teacher. It makes me rest more easily, somehow. The gaudy orange necktie she wears contrasts sharply with her white blouse, however, making her look vaguely amusing.

"Do you know that child who stabbed me?" I say apprehensively, "or perhaps it is you?"

"No, fortunately. I'm an acquaintance of your attacker and your victim.

One of them anyway. We meet the strangest people, you and I."

She takes out something from her breast pocket, but puts it away just as quickly. "Apologies. Smoking isn't allowed here I suppose? For someone with lung damage like you, it would be like poison." I guess what she took out was a cigarette carton. The image of her smoking fits her look, I think, like a mannequin with lizard pumps and a bag.

"But it isn't just the lung, is it?" Her voice is one of curiosity as she looks me over. "Certainly, that's where it all started, but there are tumors all over your body. Sarcoma is only the beginning, but it's worse inside. Your hair is the only thing that's left. You have much strength. A normal person would have died long before as this sickness ate them alive." She pauses a moment to look at me straight, then offers a smile.

"How long has this gone on, Kirie Fujō?"

I can't answer. "I have no idea. I stopped keeping count." Because there's no meaning to it. Because dying was the only way out of here.

She murmurs a soft-breathed "I see."

I hated her voice that lacked any compassion or hate. The only thing I can receive from people is their sympathy, and she denies me even that. "Shiki told me the cut was around the area of the left ventricle and the aorta, so it might

have been the mitral valve. Is it all right?" She says such an absurd thing so normally. The peculiarity of her manner of speech catches me off guard, and I smile despite myself.

"You're a strange one, aren't you? If my heart had really been cut, then we wouldn't be able to talk like this, would we?"

"Quite right. I was only confirming." I see. She was a friend of the person who stabbed me after all, perhaps trying to tie up loose ends on the battle that took place in the rooftop. "But it won't be long until it affects you as well. Shiki's Eyes are potent, perhaps even beyond what that child knows. The sympathetic connection between your double existences means that the spell will reach you in time. There are a few inquiries I need to make, which is why I'm here." She means the "other" me when she mentions the double existence, I'd imagine.

"Because I haven't personally gone to the Fujō Tower, I haven't seen your floating image there," she continues. "What was it really?"

"I don't know, to be honest. For the longest time now, the scenery outside the window was the world to me. I looked down on the panorama, watching the seasons fly past, and the coming and going of people in the hospital. My voice is never heard, and my hands never reach anything. And I grew to curse this view as I continued to suffer alone in this room." The woman's eyebrows crease as she contemplates on something. "I see now. So you really are a woman of the Fujō bloodline. Your dynasty is an old one, and pure. It's thought that you and your dynasty granted blessings of providence, but now I see that your true abilities lie in cursing. The clue was in your name, as Fujō can also mean "defile." A fitting name, don't you think?"

Dynasty.

My family.

But that too is a chapter of my life that's forever gone. Not long after I was hospitalized, both my parents and my brother met an accident and lost their lives. My medical expenses have been paid by a man who calls himself my father's friend, a curiously named man that had the air of a monk about him.

"But a curse is not so easily performed. What was it that you wished for so hard?" I can't help but smile a little bit. Finally, we have something that even she

doesn't know about.

"Have you known what it is to look down on the outside world for so long? To look at such a view for years and years, even as your consciousness erodes? I have hated, cursed, and feared the outside world for so long now, seeing it all from on high. And one day, something happened. It suddenly seemed as if I was in the sky above the hospital courtyard, the one outside my window. I could look down on everything. My body and mind were still in the room, but I felt my vision fly in the sky. But I still couldn't move from here, and my vision didn't go anywhere beyond this hospital."

"Your mind must have gained correspondence with the surroundings, considering how long you've been here. Your spatial awareness must have been quite strong." For the second time now, she pauses before she says, "Is that the time when you started to lose your eyesight?"

It seems there is little about me this woman doesn't know even before she entered the room. It's true, though. I will soon be fully blind. I nod my answer.

"Yes. I could do nothing as the world slowly turned into nothingness. At first, I thought that everything was just turning into a deep darkness. But it was the void I was gazing into. But this didn't bother me, because my real eyes were floating high up in the sky. I can only see the view around the hospital, but I was never going to get out of here anyway. Nothing really changed, if you think about it. Nothing ever changed..."

I have a short coughing fit. It's been such a long time since I talked to anyone for this long, it hurts my throat and lungs, and focusing too much makes my eyes burn.

"I see," she replies after I compose myself. "You projected your consciousness in the sky. But if that was your consciousness, then you should truly be dead, since Shiki killed your 'ghost' consciousness."

In truth, I've actually been thinking that as well. This woman keeps saying the name Shiki, who I assume to be my assailant. How was that person able to stab me? The me floating in the Fujō Tower can't touch anything, but also cannot be affected in turn. Yet this Shiki slashed me as if that was my real body.

"Answer me. Was that truly you in the Fujō Tower?" she asks with a tone of

curiosity laced with the forcefulness that has never left her voice since she came inside the room.

“It...wasn’t. I only stare at the sky, while she exists in it. That other me turned its back on me. Self abandons self.” Wording it that way made it seem like more than an affectation. I did truly turn my back on the world, as it had abandoned me. And I abandoned myself, of any hope that my sickness would get better. Being separated from the world outside the window and unable to break through that boundary no matter how hard I prayed every night, both me and the other me couldn’t put our feet firmly on the ground, and were resigned to an ephemeral, fragile existence. We share that similarity, despite parting with each other. I suppose it’s what this woman called a “sympathetic connection”.

She draws a short breath, perhaps in surprise. It’s the first time that this person has shown any sort of uncalculated emotion, and it surprises me a little. “So it’s not that your consciousness was separated, but that you were acting on two vessels with one state of mind. Someone else gave you this vessel. It’s unlike any work I’ve seen yet, I understand that much.” A small nod before she regards me with a frighteningly disappointed look. “But why go through so much just to lure children to throw themselves off buildings? Why were you not content with just looking at the world?”

Ah, those poor, enviable girls. What happened to them still saddens me. But I had nothing to do with them. They fell because they wanted to.

“You used the image of you at the Fujō Tower as more of a channel for your will, didn’t you? You reached out to them in sleep, in their dreams of flight. And in those dreamscapes, at least one or two of them were probably on the verge of awakening to magic, which is why you could notice them in the mess of other minds in this city, and why you can snare them so easily. But it was you who made them think about flying while they were outside of sleep, even as they weren’t really ‘awake’. They tried to fly, and they got the natural result of trying to do the impossible.”

Yes. In the fever dreams, they always fly around me, and I thought that we could be friends. But they never noticed me, never talked to me, never touched me. All they did was float around like fishes without consciousness. I thought that, when they were outside of sleep, in the times when they were conscious,

they could notice me. That was the only way I knew...

“You’re trembling, friend. Are you cold?” The woman’s voice returns to its previous icy demeanor. I clutch myself as the unearthly wind fails to subside, despite the window being closed. “I’d like to ask you one more thing. Why yearn so much for the sky of a world you so detest?”

A difficult question. I answer to the best of my ability. “In the sky, you can fly as far as you want, go as far as you can go, because it never ends. I thought I could find a world that I didn’t hate, and a world that could accept me in turn.”

“Did you find that world?”

My shivering doesn’t subside, the chill acting like invisible hands shaking my body. My eyes sear with pain from being focused for so long. I nod yes.

“Before I sleep every night, I fear that I will not wake up the next day. I fear that one day, it will be morning, and my eyes will never open again. But it’s also the reason why I feel alive. Strange, isn’t it? My hollow shell of a body and poor excuse for a life is always shadowed by death, but it’s that shadow which I rely on to keep myself alive.” Yes, that’s the reason why I yearn for death more than life. Death is release. To fly without end, to go anywhere one wishes...that’s the world I can yearn for.

“So you took my acquaintance as a companion to your world?”

“No. At that time, I didn’t know. I was still longing for life, and while doing so, I wanted to fly. I thought I could do so if I was with him. Those times are long gone now.”

“You and Shiki aren’t so different from each other. Both of you believe you can find salvation in someone like Kokutō. It isn’t wrong to think you can feel alive and be saved by someone else.”

Kokutō. I see. So this Shiki confronted me to take him back. Even though I know now that my savior is also the harbinger of Death, I feel no regrets. “He’s still a child. Always looking at the sky. Always so honest. That’s why I thought he could take me anywhere if he put his mind to it. I...I wanted him to take me away from all of this.” I start to cry, and it stings my eyes so much they seem to scream in pain.

It's not really because I'm sad. What happiness it could have been had he been able to spirit me away! But it will never come true. It was always a far dream. But it was such a beautiful dream, and because of that I couldn't stop the tears. In my eternity in this prison, it was the only dream I've had in so many years, the only delusion I allowed myself.

"But Kokutō has no interest in the sky. Those who long for the sky are the farthest from it. Ironic, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. People always seem to have the things we don't need. I could never truly fly. Floating was all I could do." The burning in my eyes subsides, a feeling that will probably never happen again. The wind's invisible hands grip my spine and make me tremble even more strongly.

"I've been a burden long enough. This question will have to be my last. What are you going to do after this? I can cure the creeping pain Shiki gave you through your other vessel, if that is your wish." I don't answer her, save for shaking my head no. I can't see for sure, but it seems like she's frowning. "I understand. There are two ways to escape: escape without a purpose, and escape with a purpose. I call the former 'floating', and the latter 'flight'. You are the only one that decides which of the two your view of the world from on high was. But you don't choose these paths because of the weight on your soul. We don't choose the path we take because of the sins we carry. But we carry our sins on the path we choose."

After saying her parting words, the woman leaves. She never said her name, but I know now that she didn't need to. I don't doubt for a moment that she knows what I am going to do. Because for me there is no choice: I can't fly. I can only float. I can't do what she says because I'm weak. That's why I can no longer resist this temptation: The flash of realization when I was stabbed in the heart. The overwhelming torrent of death and the pulse of life. I thought I no longer had anything left, but I was left with such a simple, sweet thing.

Death.

It was not the nonexistent wind, but death, that little fear, that gripped my spine in these last moments. I need to experience more of death to feel the joy of life, the glory of everything I had ignored in my life until now. But that death I

experienced on that night, the pain that pierced me like a needle, like a sword, like lightning, would be impossible to replicate. I cannot hope for such a vivid end now. But I will try to come as close to it as much as I can. I still have a few days to think on it, but the method need not even be said.

I think my last moment should be spent on a high place, a place where I can look down on a panorama of the world, and fall back to the embrace of the reality that has rejected me so.

### **Panorama - III**

The sun has already fallen as we leave the abandoned building Miss Tōko calls home. Shiki's apartment is quite close by, but my apartment is about twenty minutes away by train. Shiki's groggy pace and an unsteady walk remind me of the lack of sleep mentioned earlier, and I stay close beside just in case it's needed. Out of the blue, Shiki asks me a strange question. "Hey, Mikiya. Do you think suicide is right?"

"Hmm, let me think on that..." I say, trying to drum up a good answer. "Well, let's put it this way. Say I had a terribly deadly retrovirus, such that me just staying alive threatens all of Tokyo. If dying meant everyone would be saved, then maybe I'd kill myself."

"What in the hell? That's such a far-fetched scenario it hurts my brain." Shiki makes a disappointed face.

"Let me finish, alright? Think about it for a moment. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't have the will to live while the whole of Tokyo sees me as the carrier of a virulent plague. Choosing suicide would be the easier path. An instant of determination, or a lifetime; I think you can tell which is the hard choice. And that's what it boils down to, isn't it? Death is the easy choice. And when push comes to shove, I don't truly think I have what it takes to make the hard decision."

After that, we continue to walk in silence, leaving me to think more about what I said. In my scenario, sacrificing yourself might certainly be the right thing. It might even be called heroic, another one for the books. But choosing death for

yourself, no matter the practicality of such an action, seems the foolish thing to do. Struggling through the slings and arrows allows us to put ourselves to right, and emerge as better people. That's true bravery, which I don't think I could muster. I don't say it though, since I feel like Shiki is getting annoyed at me again, looking at me doubtfully after my answer.

"Anyway," I try to conclude awkwardly, "Each person has his own answers, I guess."

"You're different, though," says Shiki, as if reading my mind. Shiki said it in the usual cold front, granted, but it feels as if there's a compliment in there somewhere. Slightly taken aback, I couldn't bring myself to answer it, and we continue to walk through the city silently. Pretty soon I can hear the bustle of people and the noise of engines. It sounds like we're nearing the city's main street, with its ostentatious display of lights and sounds, accompanied by the wave of people commuting home after a day's work. I can just make out the department stores in the distance, and not too far after that is the train station.

Shiki stops suddenly.

"Mikiya, stay over at my place tonight."

"What in th—"

Shiki takes me by the shoulder in a gesture firmly in the "just fucking do it, c'mon" variety. Shiki's apartment is closer, and it would be easier that way, but I don't think I really should on moral grounds.

"It's all right, really," I try to say. "It'd be boring even if I do go there. Or are you saying there's something you need me to do?" I know there really wasn't anything, so this should have been the end of the discussion, and yet Shiki looks at me accusatorily, like I was at fault.

"Strawberry."

"Er..."

"Those goddamn ice cream cups you bought a while back. They're still there. Eat the damn things."

"Well, I suppose I did buy them." Got me there. I bought that on a hot day on

my way to Shiki's home. Was it really that hot? It's almost September after all. Well, whatever. Not like it matters in the grand scheme of things. Shiki's pulling any excuse to get me to stay, and I suppose I have no choice but to follow. But I can at least make a feeble attempt to strike back. There is a topic—serving almost like a trigger—which, when brought to discussion, makes Shiki mad but unable to retort back properly. It's about something I really want Shiki to do, but in this matter, the universe seems to have seen it proper to bestow upon Shiki the stubbornness of mules.

"I can see there's no persuading you. All right, I'll stay over. But Shiki..." Harsh eyes look at me, and I respond with as serious a face I can muster. "'Eat the damn thing?' Such unseemly words. I'd really like it if you did something about that. I mean, you are a girl after all."

Right on target. After I say "girl," she points a finger at her lips and says "Hey, my mouth, my choice of words. Got it?"

## Epilogue

That was the day when, led on by nothing except an impulse of curiosity, I took the main avenue on the way home. It wasn't a shortcut, and I didn't plan on passing by any particular place there. It was just something I decided to do on a whim.

This part of the avenue was full of skyscrapers and tall condos, some old, more of them new, while others were abandoned husks, all commingled into one crowded skyline. I'd wager everybody in the city, including me, was tired of looking at them day in and day out. While walking beside the buildings, I suddenly saw something fall from a roof to the concrete sidewalk a ways ahead of me.

It was a person.

In the moment that that person fell, I heard a sickening sound. The wet, raw sound you associate with the kind of things you don't want happening anywhere near you. The kind of sound you never really get to hear often. Judging from the height that the person fell from, it was clear that whoever he or she was died the instant it hit pavement.

As I drew closer to the point of impact, I was able to scrutinize what happened more clearly. All that was left, all that my mind could take in, was the scarlet trail seeping across the asphalt; the frail, bone-like limbs, and the long, black hair, which still retained some of its living beauty.

And that dead face.

The scene struck my mind with the image of a flower pressed between the pages of an old, musty tome. It all seemed vaguely familiar. I knew what happened here. In the end, I suppose she chose the true slumber, instead of the lie.

A throng of people had already begun to gather around, and Azaka and I soon had to work our way through them, avoiding the crowd.

“Miss Tōko, that was a jumper, wasn’t it?”

“I suppose,” I answer almost absent-mindedly. My part in this case had long since played out. Society had better things to do than psychoanalyze a jumper that just decided to take a tumble out of a building. In the end, they’d say one suicide is no different from the next. Kirie’s last wish, right up to the end, was not flight, or even floating, but to fall. A pity, but it’s best not to dwell on it for long.

“I’ve heard there were quite a lot of cases last year, but I guess it’s still a trend, huh? I don’t really understand what goes through these people’s minds, though. Would you, Miss Tōko?”

I nod my head; another vague answer. I look up at the sky, training my vision on an illusion of the light.

“She had no reason to kill herself,” I say finally. “She just wasn’t able to fly.”





April 1995

I met her.

# / 1

A cool breeze blows through the mansion, unexpected when it was just the end of summer. The wind carries tidings of autumn, and it makes me want to take an evening stroll again. I'm putting on my shoes, when a voice from behind me spoke.

“Lady *Shiki*, please do come home early this evening.”

It is Akitaka, my servant. I ignore the impositions on his ever-monotonous voice, as always, and make my way out of the entrance hall. Past the courtyard, past the garden, and past the large gate barring entry into the house, and I'm finally out. Darkness lay beyond this point, there being no light outside the main grounds itself. There is neither sight nor sound of any person except for me.

It was midnight, and it would soon be the first day of September. The bamboo thickets surrounding the periphery of the mansion rustled in the light breeze, bringing to mind images of wicked monsters beyond them. Walks through uneasy silences such as these are the only thing I derive pleasure from.

As the night grows deeper, the darkness draws closer. I think I walk through this lifeless town because I want to be alone. Or perhaps because I want to think I'm alone. Either way, in this world, it'd be hard to be completely left alone anyway. But the city has its ways. I veer off from the main avenue, taking a detour through a narrow alleyway.

I turn sixteen this year. I'm a first year student at a private high school. It's kind of pointless, really. No matter what I do, the mansion and the dynasty is my future. I chose the school just because it was close to my house and it would cut

down on my commute time, but looking back on it, that might have been a mistake.

The alley is dark, save for one streetlight flickering nervously like a beacon. It reminds me of someone.

I've been quite restless lately, even during these evening strolls. It's all because of that guy, who keeps popping up in my head whenever I least expect it, and whenever I least like it.

Being in high school didn't change anything. I couldn't grow close to anyone, and they couldn't grow close to me. I didn't know why exactly, but maybe it's because I easily express what I think in my behavior. That is to say, I'm a misanthrope. I couldn't come to like people ever since I was a child. Being a person, I never liked myself either. I didn't hate people, not really. It didn't stop them from thinking that way, though. It wasn't long before my schoolmates got the picture, and within a month, people stopped trying to ingratiate themselves with me.

Not that I didn't like a quiet environment either, so that state of affairs suited me perfectly. But I should have known better than to think it would last. There is the one classmate who treated me like a friend, a person with a surname that sounded like a French poet. The one outstanding quality I can attribute to him: annoying. So very, very annoying.

**I see the shadow of a person in the distant streetlight.**

*He pops into my mind again, him and his dumb smile.*

**Something about that man seemed strange.**

*I think back on it later.*

*Why?*

**I follow him into an alley.**

*Why did I have such a rush of excitement?*

Inside the alley, it's like an entirely different world. The alley is a cul-de-sac, with the buildings forming walls all around it. Because of this, no sunlight shone upon it even on bright afternoons. Honestly, it looked more like a room than an alley. There was once one homeless person who lived in this dead space, but not today. The walls of this alley just got a brand new paint job. There is a wet, sticky quality to the ground, and the usual smell of rotten food is commingled with an even stronger scent.

All around me is a sea of blood. Bodily fluids seep and flow through the alley, and the sweet, sticky smell pierces my nostrils. In the center of it all is the corpse. Whatever face he donned in death can't be seen anymore. His arms were severed, and the legs became stumps around the knee area, pressurized blood pouring out of them.

A world so different, even the darkness of night was being overwhelmed by the bold crimson of blood. It made me so happy. Gracefully, elegantly, I touch the blood running on the ground, the sleeves of my light blue kimono turning a deep red. I streak the liquid on my lips, and a drop slips down lazily across my face. My body shakes in utter ecstasy, as if in a trance. The first lipstick I ever had.

## / 2

As summer vacation draws to a close, a new semester of high school begins. Nothing really changes in life, least of all high school. The clothes of the students change to reflect the approaching cold of autumn, but apart from that small trifling thing, there is nothing else. The same old routine, day in and day out.

As for me, I've never worn anything other than a kimono my entire life. Akitaka tried to get me clothes "befitting a woman of my sixteen years", but I never even thought of putting them on. Lucky for me, then, that the school I go to allows you to wear anything you want, so I actually went to school in my traditional dress. Actually, I wanted to wear the formal style of kimono, but if I did that, I'd have to spend the entirety of P.E. just to change clothes (which may not be so bad), so I made a compromise with a one-layer yukata.

I did worry a bit about what to wear in the cold winter months, but a solution presented itself yesterday. During break time he approached me in his usual crude manner, asking if I felt cold.

"Not right now, no," I replied. "But perhaps in a few more weeks." He frowned, as if reading my mind. "You're wearing that in the winter too?"

Wanting the conversation to end as quickly as possible, I answered directly. "Without fail. There's no need to worry yourself, however. I can wear something over it, after all."

"Wow, I didn't figure there was anything you could possibly wear over a kimono." With that, he walked away, puzzled at my answer. It was something I

thought up at the moment, but not wanting to lie, I decided to buy a warm leather jacket. I'll wear it when winter comes, but for now, it stays in my closet.

And just like that, we ended up eating lunch together every day. He invited me, and I couldn't refuse out of politeness. We had our meals at the roof of the school building, where there were pairs of boys and girls just like us idling their lunch time.

Today's lunch break is just like any other, and I'm eyeing the other couples when he suddenly talks to me. I had already planned to ignore him, but he says something that I couldn't ignore.

"Murder. It happened on the last day of summer vacation. It was on the western wing of the commercial district. There's an embargo on the media, though, so it hasn't been reported yet."

"...That isn't very nice, is it?" I say nervously.

"Yeah. It's a weird case, too. Apparently the suspect cut off the victim's hands and feet and left him there to die. The crime scene was a mess, and they had to cordon off the entire location. What's worse is that the suspect is still at large."

"You say the suspect cut off the arms and legs? Can people die from just that?"

"Blood loss would cause a lack of oxygen in the body, but in this case I'd say circulatory shock came first," he says while chewing his food. Outwardly, he looks like a calm, innocent young man, but in the end I suppose these are the sorts of things he really wants to talk about. I suppose one of his relatives is in the police force, or at least has connections there. Surely not too high a standing, however, else he wouldn't be leaking information out like this. "Oh, I'm sorry. I guess this has nothing to do with you, *Shiki*."

"It's quite alright...but Kokutō, this isn't really a meal time topic, don't you think?" I complain.

He offers only a simple nod in reply, barely even registering his faux pas. Good grief. Now, thanks to him, I can't stomach eating the tomato sandwich I just bought.

And so I capped off the end of summer and welcome the coming of autumn by hearing such a morbid rumor. The life that I thought would never change would soon receive a rude awakening.

It's been raining hard since morning. The clacking of my footsteps on the school corridor mixed with the pitter-patter sound of the raindrops. School has concluded for the day, and not a single soul could be found inside the grounds at this hour. Normally, there would still be students doing club activities, but the murder incident that Kokutō told me about had finally gone public, and club activities have since been temporarily suspended.

Akitaka told me in the drive to school earlier this morning that it had already reached four murders this month alone. That's what blew this wide open. The suspect remained as yet free from the law, and whatever personality, character, or motive he might have for doing this isn't yet known. In fact, marking the suspect as male might even be too hasty right now. There are no common points connecting the victims, except for the fact that they were all taking a walk quite late in the evening. It really is quite a different story when it's happening to your own city instead of some remote and far away town. Students stop hanging out after school and go home immediately, and everyone goes home in groups. The vise grip the murderer has on the city is so tangible I can almost touch it. Even I'm affected, since the police go on patrols at 9 o' clock in the evening. I can't even go out to do my nightly strolls.

“Four murders...” I whisper under my breath. Four times, I’ve... “Ryōgi?” someone calls out suddenly. I turn towards the direction of the voice and see a man I don’t recognize. He’s wearing blue jeans and a white shirt, both of them quite plain and unsatisfactory. He must be someone in a higher grade level than me.

“Yes, that would be me. What is it?”

“Oh, please don’t glare at me with those cold eyes of yours. Are you looking for Kokutō?”

What a foolish man. I could see right through his fake smile.

“I was about to go home. I have no idea how Kokutō factors into that.” “Is that so?” The drawl in his voice was practically audible at this point. “That’s where you’re wrong, and you know it. That’s why you’re irritated. It isn’t good to take it out on someone else. It can be easier to blame anyone other than yourself. It’s become a habit for you, hasn’t it?” He chuckles at a joke funny only to himself, but continues. “Ryōgi... don’t you think four times is a bit too much?”

“What?!” Inadvertently, I take a step back. The man smiles yet again, a satisfied smile I now realize looks similar to my own.

“I’ve wanted to talk to you for so long now. Now that I have, it’s time to bid you farewell.” After that, he walks away, the sound of his footsteps echoing in the dim, empty hall. It produced a vaguely disgusted feeling inside me. I don’t even want look at him, so I head towards the school entrance.

After changing out of my school shoes, I head outside only to have the rain greet me. Akitaka, who was supposed to pick me up, evidently isn’t here yet. On rainy days such as this one, he would always come by to give me a ride, but he is obviously late. I’m too lazy to bother changing shoes again, so I decide to take shelter from the rain in the shade of the entryway.

The rain looks faintly like a veil, and it makes the campus grounds look as if they were encased by fog. The winter chill makes the pale whiteness of my breath visible.

I don’t know how much time passed by, but before I could notice, Kokutō had appeared at my side.

“I have an umbrella,” he says awkwardly.

“It’s alright. I have someone picking me up. You should hurry up and head home,” I urge.

“In a moment. I thought I’d stay here until your driver got here. If that isn’t too

much trouble?”

Without waiting for me to answer, he leans against the concrete wall of the entrance. I wasn’t thinking on what Kokutō was going to say or about to say. In fact, I planned on systematically ignoring him until such time that I could leave.

A miracle. He’s actually quiet for once. I can only hear the sound of the falling raindrops. Kokutō wasn’t talking at all. I turned to him only to see that, with a satisfied look on his face, he had already closed his eyes. I thought that he was sleeping, as unlikely as that may be, but I hear him singing under his breath. I know it was a famous song, but I couldn’t remember the title.

Truly a miracle. Much later when I got home, I asked Akitaka what the song was, and it turned out to be “Singing in the Rain.”

Kokutō didn’t speak. We weren’t even a meter apart. For us to be this close and not talking made me a bit unsettled. It was an awkward situation, but the silence wasn’t at all painful. Strange. Why was this silence calming? But then the silence frightened me, as suddenly as I warmed to it. Instinct raced in my mind, telling me that if it stayed like this, he would come out.

“KOKUTŌ!”

“Yes?! ”

With a jump, he opens his eyes and stands straight.

“What happened? Is something wrong?” he says while looking at me oddly. I see myself reflected in his eyes. Looking at each other like that, it was probably the first time I really saw Mikiya Kokutō, still just a boy, with a boy’s face, and a gentle disposition. He had black hair which he didn’t style in any particular way, and similarly black eyes, where he wore stupid glasses that even little children would find atrocious. He wore no accessories, and his only concession to fashion was his insistence on wearing an all-black ensemble all the time. It has always puzzled me why he always gave a mind to anything I did.

“Where...” I look down, trying my damndest to think that the ground is the most interesting in the world. “Where were you before you came out here?”

“In the student council room. One of our upperclassmen is dropping out of school, and we held something like a farewell party for him. His name’s Lio

Shirazumi. He said he's dropping out because he found something he wanted to do. It surprised me, seeing as he was one of those quiet, unsocial types." Lio Shirazumi. I can't say I've heard of the person. But Kokutō knows a lot of people I don't. The class sees him as a friend to everyone, and he has some small popularity with the female upperclassman population.

"I invited you too, didn't I? I told you when we said goodbye to each other yesterday, but you never showed up in the student council room. I looked for you in the classroom, but there was no one there."

He did indeed invite me, but I would've just spoiled the mood by going there. That, and I thought Kokutō inviting me was just him being his usual polite self. He didn't really expect me to go...did he?

"Oh, so you were serious?"

"Of course I was! What did you think, *Shiki*?" Kokutō, understandably, gets mad, not because of what I said but what I thought he said. I've never really experienced someone being angry at me, and it confuses me. From that moment on I sink into silence and wait with my mouth shut. I don't think there's ever been a day that I wanted Akitaka to come quickly as badly as this one. Not long thereafter, the car entered the front gate, and I say an awkward goodbye to Kokutō.

When the sun began to set, and it grew darker and darker, the rain finally stopped. Putting on my red leather blouson, I head outside to clear my head. The night sky overhead is in turmoil. The clouds that blanketed the sky only occasionally gave way to the moon and the stars. In the city, policemen in uniform and plainclothes alike patrolled the streets, and I made my way to the riverbank in hopes of avoiding them.

Wet asphalt reflects the dim glow of the streetlights. From afar, I hear the menacing metallic rumbling of a train. That means the train viaduct is near. Almost arbitrarily, I decide to head towards that direction, but I stop short upon reaching it when I see someone there.

Slowly and purposefully, I approach.

Another train passes overhead, probably tonight's last ride. The noise is louder this time, since I'm closer, and it sounds like rolling thunder. The rumble

reverberates as loudly as if I was in a sealed room, and I have to cover my ears if I don't want to go deaf. After the train passes, however, a solemn sort of silence descends under the viaduct.

Without streetlight or moonlight, this place is in complete darkness. That might be for the best. Red liquid is spread all around the riverbank, yet even this is almost black because of the lack of light. This would be the fifth. The weeds around here are overgrown, but the corpse it surrounds looks like a single solitary flower, red and artificial. The face is at the center, with dismembered arms and legs surrounding it, twisted to look like flower petals, or a manji cross.

I'm starting to get used to this. I gulp, and I realize my throat is dry. Is it tension, or arousal, I wonder? My thirst burns my throat, but it doesn't matter. This place is pregnant with death, and I smile wordlessly in spite of myself. The thirst turns into screaming ecstasy inside of me, the pleasure almost too overwhelming, but I manage to hold it back. I gaze upon the beautiful corpse once more, and feel for once that I am truly alive.

## / 4

At the beginning of each month, it is customary in the Ryōgi dynasty for the head of the family and the heir to have a sword duel with live steel. In the past, different swordmasters would be invited to participate in the duel, and to teach their craft. But then, tiring of such acts, one of my ancestors stopped this practice long ago, and created within the manor his own school of swordsmanship. Into such a tradition was I born, and even a girl of the Ryōgi dynasty must bear a certain standard with the sword.

My father was a strong man, and skillful with his weapon. In our duel, he made the sword dance like no other, and easily overpowered me. It is this disparity in skill and strength that has just made me lose the duel. After this, I waste no time in returning to the main building of the manor, which lies a fair bit of distance away from the dōjo. The wooden floor of the compound is immaculately treated, and makes no sound as my feet tread upon it.

On the way, I see Akitaka standing in a corridor waiting for me. Ten years my senior, Akitaka is the servant assigned to me by the household since my childhood days. He is a dutiful and patient man, especially with me. He's probably waiting on me so he can change me out of my sweat-soaked clothes.

“You fought a close duel today. How is your father?”

“Goddamit, Akitaka, stop shadowing me all the time. I can at least change by myself. It’s not like we’re joined at the hip. You’d be better served sucking up to my brother, you know that? Males succeed the dynasty, after all.” Despite my rudeness, Akitaka smiles. “You are quite wrong, my lady. There is no successor

to the dynasty but you, for you are the only one that inherited the gift.”

The statement elicits a small chuckle from me. “A gift, is it? What I have, Akitaka, is a curse.”

Leaving Akitaka in the corridor, I continue to head toward the main building. Once I reach my room, I instinctively lock the door shut and immediately undress my training garments. I steal a glance of myself in the mirror, at the body of a sixteen year old girl. Actually, I only need to put in a little effort to make my face look like a guy, but I can’t cheat that way with the rest of my body. The body that continues to grow, month after month, year after year...the body that **Shiki** detests more and more with each passing day.

“It might have been better for me to be a guy,” I say to no one in particular. No one is listening, except for me. Except for him. The one inside me called **Shiki**.

All descendants of our clan are given two different names, two different logograms, though with the same pronunciation. There is the masculine name, which belongs to yang, the positive. And then the feminine name, which belongs to yin, the negative. As I was born a girl, I am *Shiki*. Had I been a boy, I would have been named **Shiki**. The reason we undertake such a peculiar practice is simple to understand. The descendants of the Ryōgi dynasty have a high chance of inheriting dissociative identity disorder, what most people would know as a split personality...in other words, someone like me.

My father once said that ours was a dynasty blessed, a state of grace that only few know. He also said it was a curse. He got the “curse” part right, at least. This isn’t a state of grace by any stretch of the imagination. It is, quite simply, an abnormality. Fortunately, I’m the first in a long time to successfully inherit the curse. Unfortunately, that only means that a lot of my relatives ended up in asylums before they were even old enough to understand what that meant. Having two personalities breaks most people eventually. The difference between dream and consciousness, the boundary between your memory and the other’s becomes blurred, and one so afflicted soon turns to suicide. But I was different. I didn’t become insane like the others...and so I was trained by the family.

I like to think it’s because me and Shiki ignore each other. To me, **Shiki** is just

another personality, one I switch to when I need it, and we exist simultaneously, aware of each other. In the duel between me and my father, I needed his aggressiveness, so I used him. But I am in control. Altogether, it's a bit different from what people usually call a split personality. I am *Shiki*, but at the same time, I am also **Shiki**.

Father was proud, proud to have actually spawned a proper heir to the dynasty in his generation. My older brother was cast aside in the line of succession, and I took his place. And really, I'm fine with that. I don't bite the hand that feeds me. And I don't mind living this poor excuse for a normal life. Not like I have any choice in the matter. Even if, say, **Shiki** turns into a cold-blooded killer, I can't make him go away. There will always be something called "Shiki" inside of me, and in the end, both of us are the same. No more and no less.

## The First Homicide Inquiry - I

“So it’s true then? You and the Ryōgi girl have hooked up?”

I almost turn the coffee milk in my mouth into a projectile at what Gakuto just said. I go into a coughing fit after almost choking on the damn thing, but it does give me a scant few seconds to scan the classroom for anyone who heard that. Everyone seems to be busy minding their own lunchtime business.

“What do you mean?” I finally manage to say after gulping down my drink.

“Don’t be playin’ dumb with me.” Gakuto’s face looks like he wants to shift the blame away from himself. “It ain’t no secret that you’ve been eyeing Ryōgi. Matter of fact, judging from the reaction you just made, seems the only ones who ain’t wise to it are the both of you.”

I can’t see myself so I can’t really say, but I think I might inadvertently be making the most disappointed frown I’ve ever made in my life.

The increasingly frigid winds and rapidly decreasing temperature signal November and the advent of winter, meaning that it’s been seven months since I first met *Shiki*. The time and our tendency to hang out together must have given people the wrong impression.

“I’m sorry to say that you have been misinformed,” I finally say. “We’re just friends, if you could even call it that.”

“That a fact?” His continued disbelief exasperates me. That Gakuto’s parents stuck him with a name meaning “man of learning” is the textbook definition of irony. It goes against his thick-headedness and his entire tendency to gravitate

towards sports and less towards academically inclined pursuits. His status as the pride of the jūdō team attested to that more than anything. Despite our seeming incompatibility, we've struck a friendship that started way back in grade school that somehow sticks to this day. "You're on a first name basis, though," he continues. "She don't seem like the kind of broad to just let that go without a warning."

"*Shiki* really hates being called by her last name, though. I called her 'Ryōgi' one time just to see what happened, and she gave me a look as if I just killed her pet dog or something. She insisted that I not be formal with her, so I ended up just calling her by her first name. Pretty boring, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so," he finally concedes after a sigh and a five second delay. He looks really disappointed, leaving me to wonder what kind of crazy story he was expecting. "Then your rendezvous last week at the school entrance wasn't a thing, either? This is a waste of time man, talking to you expecting details. Shoulda just shut up and ate my lunch back in the classroom."

"Wait, back it up. How the hell do you know about last week?"

"I told you, boy, you and Ryōgi are famous. Mostly because of Ryōgi, but whatever. Your rainy day get-together was this morning's hallway talk. Since it's about Ryōgi, every mouth in this damn school been talking." I let out a frustrated sigh and cast a gloomy look at the sky, silently praying that this mess doesn't reach *Shiki*'s ears. She'd kill me.

"They say this school has a lot of college entrants that turn out well, don't they? I'm starting to wonder if people here really are that smart," I blurt out half-jokingly.

"Well, if it's any consolation, at least some of the upperclassmen got work out of this here school," he replies matter-of-factly. I'm about to make another joke at the expense of the school's administration and curriculum when Gakuto chimes in again. "Seriously, though, there's one thing that don't sit right with me: of all the fine girls in this school, why Ryōgi? Whichever way you wanna spin it, it just don't seem at all like you."

I recall being told something similar by one of my friends in the higher year level. I was told a more down-to-earth girl would suit me more, with the not-so-

subtle hint that *Shiki* was altogether too strange. The words are different but I recognize the same sort of subtle insinuation in what Gakuto just said, and it makes me a little angry.

“Oh, come off it. *Shiki* isn’t as scary as you make her out to be,” I say inadvertently. Gakuto suddenly makes a huge, stupid grin, as if finally claiming some elusive prize.

“Just a friend,’ huh? Easy, man, no need to raise your voice at me. Just curious, is all. Scary chicks like that don’t come a dime a dozen, you feel me? You not seeing how cold she is just means you already crazy for her.” He must mean “hard-headed and obstinate” when he says “cold”, because that’s the only way I’d describe *Shiki*. I know Gakuto’s right, so only with reluctance do I finally concede.

“I know, alright? Okay, you got me, Christ.”

“Then what part of her do you like? Her looks? What?” I have no idea what’s motivating him and his drive to ask every single detailed question. Well, it’s clear that *Shiki* is good looking, no doubt about it. But that’s not what really draws me to her. *Shiki* always looks like she’s hiding some invisible wound, some fragile part of her that’s on the verge of breaking and eating her from the inside out, killing her slowly. You see the emptiness in her face, her thousand-yard stare, and you realize it isn’t just some convenient metaphor; it’s real, somehow, and she needs help. I don’t want to see her get hurt.

“Well, she does have her cute sides,” I venture hesitantly. “If I were to compare her to an animal, she’d be a rabbit I guess.” As soon as I say that, I regret it immediately. It’s a big hit with Gakuto, however, who laughs heartily upon hearing it almost reflexively.

“A rabbit? Man, that ain’t even half right and you know it. If she were an animal, she’d be a hawk that can claw the shit outta your eyes, or some shit like that. A rabbit is just...” he tries to find his words amid bouts of laughter. “...just too far off the scale. Or wait, wait. Maybe she’s the kind of bird that dies from loneliness?” Another huge laugh.

“That’s it. I’m not talking to you about girls anymore.”

All of a sudden, Gakuto’s laughter stops. “Know what? A rabbit might’ve been

a good comparison after all.”

Now it is my turn to laugh, though I manage to suppress the urge. “Gakuto, an about-face that quick is pretty suspicious, don’t you think?” “Nah, nah, it ain’t about that. I just remembered that there’re rabbits that can bite your head off if you’re not careful, man.”

After thinking on it perhaps a moment longer than I should have, I respond. “Bullshit.”

“Boy, of course it’s bullshit,” Gakuto says, stretching his arms and leaning back on his seat. “I’m talking ‘bout video games, man.”

## The First Homicide Inquiry - II

On the day the finals for the second quarter ended, I saw a very unusual thing.

Inside my desk was a letter, which automatically makes it a bit weird, but it didn't end there. It was the content of the letter and its sender that surprised me. It was *Shiki* brazenly asking me out on a date. The letter said something simple like "take me out on a date, will ya?", but something about it was vaguely threatening, almost like an ultimatum.

I came home that day, not knowing what to make of what I just read. I waited for the next day to come, with all the dread of a samurai who had just been ordered to commit seppuku the first thing in the morning.

I've been waiting for what must have been an hour in the place *Shiki* designated: the statue of the dog Hachikō in front of the train station, when I finally see her walking towards me from quite a bit away. The first thing I notice is that she's wearing a different colored kimono today, the color of autumn leaves. It actually goes well with her bright red jacket. Though I see *Shiki* almost every day, I've never really noticed how small she is, looking at her from this distance. The walk that animates her makes her features look distant and cold, and yet she carries herself with dignity and grace; a contradiction not unlike the one you would find on a puppet, a puppet almost alive in its appearance, and yet ultimately dead.

"Yo, Kokutō. Been waiting long? My bad, man. Losing Akitaka was a pain in the ass."

The second thing I notice is that she pronounces my name weird, and I get the

feeling she's referencing some long-dead French poet with it. And that's not even going into the way she's talking now. It leaves me stunned for a second, and I look at her a bit too long, as if to confirm whether it really is *Shiki* or some sort of elaborate but dumb prank by Gakuto.

"What, being an hour late is a cardinal sin now?" *Shiki* says. She must have noticed my mouth now hanging half-open. "Unclenching your ass some would do you wonders, my friend." *Shiki*'s black eyes stare at me weirdly. The same eyes that always looked like they were staring at something far off, even during the first time we met on that snowy day.

"Um, I—I just wanna check," I stutter, laughing in my head as I do so. "You're *Shiki*, right?"

She raises an eyebrow at me. "You were expecting maybe the school principal?" *Shiki* laughs, leaving a suspended grin on her face afterwards. "Well, time's a-wastin'. I'm not good at this, so I'm gonna have to leave it to you where we go."

She then grabs my arm in a solid grip and starts to walk. Making a mockery of her final statement, she strings me along by the arm across a variety of specialty stores, never really buying anything, but moving on to a new shop after she gets bored. I try reasoning with her, see if she wanted to go to a movie or a coffee shop to take a breather, but she parries with an immediate and resounding "No." She's probably right, anyway. Going to such boring places wouldn't fit *Shiki*'s character now.

She talked. A lot. Quite a contrast to the usually quiet *Shiki* I knew. It's like she's high or something. Most of the stores we visit are clothing stores. Given the state she's in right now, it made me breathe a sigh of relief that she's still going to women's clothing stores. Finally, after four hours of keeping up with *Shiki*, she says she wants to eat, and so after much wandering, she decides on a fast food store.

The second we go inside the restaurant *Shiki* attracts attention with her ridiculously out of place kimono, but she doesn't seem to mind. As she places her jacket on her seat and sits down, I decide to ask her the obvious. "So, is this the way you normally talk out of school, *Shiki*?"

“Only in my case,” she says in between furious chewing of hamburger chunks. It looks like she doesn’t like it. “But really, how you talk means absolutely nothing. I mean, you could change how you talk right now and you’d still be the same guy, right?” *Shiki* finishes the hamburger in seconds. “I’m sure I’ve got you absolutely confused right about now.”

She has no idea.

“I guess I have some explaining to do. This is the first time you’ve seen me after all. I’ve been quiet until now because me and *Shiki* were on the same wavelength on this one.”

The words are going in, but I don’t understand what she’s saying at all. “It’s what you would call a split personality. I’m **Shiki**, and the one you usually see is *Shiki*. But don’t get me wrong, we’re not like different people or anything. *Shiki* Ryōgi has always been one person. The only difference between us is our priorities.”

While she says this, she puts a wet finger to a paper napkin, writing her two names, with two differing characters but the same pronunciation. One **Shiki** that means “weave”. Another *Shiki* that means “ritual”.

“I just wanted to give you a friendly neighborhood chat, is all. *Shiki* wasn’t keen on the idea, so I took over in her place. You get me?” “I...suppose so,” I answer uneasily. The truth is that I really do sort of get it, when I think about the time we met at the school orientation. We’d met before that, but when we talked at the orientation, she said she didn’t know anything about it. I thought it was because she hated me or some other similar reason, but I guess now I can kind of understand.

Being with her for half the day, I come to understand there really isn’t so big a difference between today’s **Shiki** and the *Shiki* I supposedly know. Like she says, she talks differently, but the way she moves is the same. So much the same, in fact, that doubting the veracity of what she says seems now a foolish notion.

“But why tell me?” I say.

“Figured it’s only a matter of time before you knew.” She takes a sip from her juice but immediately puts it down. She doesn’t really like cold things.

“I’m what you would call *Shiki*’s destructive impulse. I represent the things she wants to do the most. But until now there’s no one I could direct this impulse at. *Shiki* had no real interest in anyone.” She mentions this with disinterest and just a tinge of regret, as if dreading the fact that she had to say it at all. She keeps looking at me seriously, and I’m afraid of what she’ll do should I move.

“You can relax, man. I’m still myself, and I’m just being a mouthpiece for what *Shiki* thinks right now. I’m not gonna go Charles Whitman on you.” There is a pause for a moment, as her face grows more stern, as if to presage the saying of something important. “Though...we are beginning to be out of sync, so I’d take myself with just a little grain of salt, if I were you.” “Out of sync?” Does that mean you and *Shiki* got in a fight?”

“I like how you think someone can have a fight with himself. But no, not like that. See, whatever I do, it has to be something we both want. *Shiki*’s at the helm here, so meeting you was a mutual decision. She probably would have gone about it entirely different, though. It’s not really in her to just go out and take you on a date. You can thank me for that one.” I nod without really thinking, focusing more on what she’s saying, partly because it’s interesting, and partly because I can’t take in half of what she’s saying. **Shiki** laughs. “See, I like that about you. *Shiki* thinks otherwise. That’s what I mean when I say out of sync.”

The way she worded it, I don’t know if *Shiki* doesn’t like that I don’t give it much thought, or if *Shiki* doesn’t like that **Shiki** likes me. I’d like to believe it’s the latter though, for the sake of my pride at the very least. Quite abruptly, **Shiki** stands up, and puts the money for the food she ate on the table.

“Well, guess that’s about it. Let’s call it a day.”

Putting her jacket on, she makes her way to the door with a happy skip in her walk, leaving with only one thing to say: “You’re all right, man. I like you, so we’ll see each other real soon.”

After parting with **Shiki**, I start to make my way home. Once I reach the street, I’m surprised to see the city being bathed with the warm glow of sunset. Though it’s still a relatively early time, there’s a lot less people in the main road than usual thanks to the recent murders.

I must be tired after talking (not to mention window shopping) with **Shiki** for that long, so I make my way inside my house with only a cursory greeting to my parents. I was planning to inhabit the kotatsu for a good warm nap, only to find my cousin Daisuke, a frequent visitor and a good friend, had already usurped the table. Wordlessly, we initiate a battle for the warm table, struggling with our legs to gain the most ground. In the end, however, I am no match for him, and while he lies down, half his body being warmed by the kotatsu, I end up having to stand up.

“You must be busy these days, Daisuke,” I say while eating some of the oranges on top of the table, resignation clear in my voice.

“Yeah, real busy, what with five murders in three months. Sorry for crashing in your house like this. Figured your dad’s house was closer to the police station, and I only get one hour of R&R before I need to get back, so going home would have been a waste of time.”

My cousin Daisuke is a homicide detective in the city police, an irony since he’s “kind of a lazy guy.” His words, not mine. Why the department would put a man so unfit for the position of solving crime is a mystery not even he can solve. He’s my go-to source for all of the crime related stuff that happens, a convenience that seems to be proving its worth with every passing day.

“How’s the search going?” I ask.

“Baby steps. We were pretty hard up for leads, but in this fifth vic, the suspect finally threw us a bone, even if it does seem intentional.” Daisuke sits up and faces me, a grim look on his worn out and sleep-deprived face. “What I’m about to tell you is confidential, Mikiya. You’re not entirely unrelated to this, so listen up. I told you about the first vic, right?”

Daisuke then proceeds to describe the situation with the second and third victims. While hoping that not all policemen in the country are this loose-tongued, I listen to his story. The second victim was vertically sliced in half from the crotch to the head. Murder weapon unknown. One of the halves was stuck to the wall.

The third victim had his limbs cut off, and the arms sewn to the legs. The fourth was cut into pieces, with what looked like a symbol or some other

marking left on the body. The fifth was arranged such that the arms and legs formed a manji symbol.

“Obviously someone with some sort of mental disorder,” I say, trying to hold back the growing sickness in my stomach.

“Too obvious, though. This guy has some sort of point to make here. What do you think?”

“Hmm. I don’t think there’s any meaning in them all being killed by a cutting weapon. Other than that, I don’t know. But...”

“But?”

“He’s getting used to it. All the victims until now have been outside. The next one might be a break and enter job.”

Daisuke puts a hand on his temple. I really do pity the stress this job, and heck, this case is giving him. I know he’s barely had any time to himself. “There’s no motive, no pattern,” he observes. “And he might try going inside houses next if he doesn’t find anyone outside to kill. I hope the brass gets the same read on this guy and have some sort of plan for it. Probably not, though.”

He closes his eyes, right hand still resting on his head, nursing an invisible wound. “As for why I told you all of this...we found this in the fifth crime scene. Suspect probably dropped it.” He produces a small plastic bag from his pocket; the kind used to preserve evidence, and inside is our school emblem. We have to stick it somewhere in our clothes when we go to school.

“The area had a lot of vegetation, so the suspect might not have noticed that he dropped this. Or it could have been intentional, some sort of message. I don’t know. But it’s the only lead I got. I might be paying your school a visit in a few days,” Daisuke says, almost like a premonition for an ill omen.

## The First Homicide Inquiry - III

Before anyone could grow comfortable or complacent with it, winter vacation ends. The only special thing that happened during that time was that I made the customary visit to the shrine on New Year's with *Shiki*, but other than that, there was nothing else of note.

As the third term starts, *Shiki* starts to isolate herself even more. Even I could tell she was trying to stay away from other people as much as possible. After school, she likes to look out the window when everyone else has left, but it would always be **Shiki** that waits, just like today. I keep her company, even though she hasn't said that she wants me to. She needs it, I think.

The winter evenings come earlier, and the sunset that heralds it bathes the classroom in a deep red light. The bright light makes the shadows that play across the classroom's walls even darker, and **Shiki's** shadow is no exception. She leans against the window before she begins to talk.

“Say, Kokutō. Did I ever tell you that I hate people?”

“Not really.” I reply with the tone that implies skepticism at where this topic is going.

“Well, congratulations, now you know. *Shiki's* a misanthrope, been one since she was a kid. See, when you're a kid, you don't know nothing yet, right? You think every random Joe you meet on the street loves ya, just like that. I mean, you love yourself, so it's common sense that they must like you too, right?”

“I suppose. When you're a kid, you still trust everyone. When you're a kid, you're scared of ghosts. When you grow up, you get scared of other people.”

“Right. But that ignorance is what’s really important, Kokutō. It never occurs to you that your best friend could be a murderer, or that your neighbor could be killing puppies in his spare time. You don’t suspect. And since you don’t know anything, other people will accept you. And no matter how fake that is, it’s important, since you’ll be able to love other people too. People can only express the emotions they know, after all.”

The sunset paints her face red, and her eyes acquire that peculiar gaze of hers, reminiscent of the kind of casual, perhaps feigned disdain of a predator hiding its intentions from its prey. Right now, I can’t tell which **Shiki** she currently is. Maybe it doesn’t even matter.

“But it was different for me. Since the day I was born, *Shiki* had me inside of her, so she already knew of other people. I didn’t love her, and so she learned that it was possible for people not to love. Ever since she was a kid, she learned how ugly people can be on the inside, and so she couldn’t love other people. In time, that tempered to rejection, and then disinterest.”

*And that’s how I grew to dislike people*, her eyes seemed to conclude. “But weren’t you lonely like that?” I muse.

“Why would I be? *Shiki* has me, doesn’t she? She was isolated from society, sure, but alone? Never.” She tries her best to look like she really means it. “But lately,” she continues, “*Shiki* has been acting kinda weird. She’s been trying harder and harder to deny her abnormality. Denial is what I do. She’s only supposed to affirm.” **Shiki** laughs bitterly at their private joke, her sinister smile betraying the brutality beneath.

“Kokutō, have you ever wanted to kill someone?”

At that moment, the sun shone in a peculiar way, making her face take on a deep, crimson, almost blood-stained look, and it made my heart jump. “Not really, no. Probably the furthest I’ve ever thought in that vein is wanting to punch someone.”

“I see. But for me, that desire is all I have,” she declares, as her voice echoes across the empty classroom, now lit by a burning red sun.

“What do you mean?”

“All the things that *Shiki* really wants to do, all the things she holds back, I welcome with open arms. It’s my sole meaning and purpose, and it doesn’t make me unhappy at all to know that. And that’s why *Shiki* has always tried to suppress me. She always tries to kill the black stain in her that’s called **Shiki**. I’ve killed myself, over and over and over again. I told you, right? ‘People can only express the emotions they know?’ Well, the only emotion I’ve ever experienced...is murder.”

She finally stands up from the windowsill, and without making so much as a sound, draws closer to me, and in that moment, I feel fear, genuine fear, in my heart.

“And that’s why, Kokutō, *Shiki*’s definition of murder,” she pauses and leans close to my ear, her murmur as audible as a shout, “is killing *me*. She kills anything that makes me want to come out.”

And with her prankster smile grimly signaling the end of the conversation, Shiki leaves the classroom.

The day after, I try to pretend as if nothing happened. I go about the motions as usual, and of course this includes inviting *Shiki* to eat lunch together.

“Wanna grab a bite with me?”

“What...in the...” Her face betrays surprise, a face I’ve yet to see her put on until now, and yet with her voice wavering, she reluctantly accepts, perhaps to preserve routine more than anything.

*Shiki* always liked going to the roof, and so we head there. We climb the stairs, with *Shiki* choosing to remain silent, but I knew her pointed stare of surprise and anger is boring a hole in my back. I know the reason why she’s mad. Even I could read between the lines of what **Shiki** said yesterday. But it’s not like she hasn’t unconsciously been sending signals for me to back off, and I just take it as business as usual.

When I open the door to the roof, we find that we’re all alone. It seems that we’re the only ones that want to eat lunch under the cold late-January sky.

“Man, it’s cold,” I say. “Wanna go somewhere else?”

“I’m alright. If you want to eat somewhere else, however, then you are welcome to do so.”

As always, her sarcasm-drenched politeness doesn’t really bother me. We sit beside the wall to avoid the chill of the wind, with me already having finished two sandwiches. *Shiki* hasn’t even touched hers.

“*Why are you even talking to me?*” *Shiki* murmured something almost inaudible even in this deserted rooftop, and it was so sudden I wasn’t able to hear it clearly.

“You said something, *Shiki*? ”

“I said, why are you so thoughtless?” she says while fixing me with the same angry glare she had on earlier.

“Oh, come on. I’ve been called ‘honest to a fault’ many times before, but never ‘thoughtless.’ ”

“Then everyone’s been going easy on you,” she says, sounding convinced. *Shiki* finally breaks open the wrapping on her egg sandwich; the sound of the

crunching plastic seal echoed in the empty rooftop. The noise was fitting somehow. *Shiki* sits silently now while eating her sandwich in small, deliberate chunks, and as I'm already done, I'm just sort of idling. I can practically feel the wave of angered expectation she's generating, so I try to break it by starting the conversation that had been in the air since I asked her to eat lunch with me.

“*Shiki*, I’m sure you’re a little mad at me...”

“A little?!”

Her eyes stare needle point daggers at me. It’s what I get for just saying what comes to mind, but this subject needed to be broached sooner or later anyway.

“God, you’re annoying,” *Shiki* sighs. “I have no idea why you still choose to associate yourself with me after all that I’ve shown you and all that *Shiki* said to you yesterday.”

“I don’t know why either,” I shrug lightly. “Being with you is kinda fun, but if you asked me why, I wouldn’t know what to say.”

“Kokutō, you do understand that I’m abnormal, right?”

There’s nothing I can do but nod. Her split personality (or whatever it is) obviously makes her some variety of odd. “Of course I do.”

“Then why aren’t you getting it? I’m not someone you can just walk up to everyday and expect to hang out normally with.”

“Does it really matter if you’re normal or not?”

That statement made for *Shiki*’s second surprised face of the day. She looks at me straight and unmoving, so much that I thought that she might have even stopped breathing.

“But...I can’t be anything like you,” *Shiki* says. She brushes a hand on her hair, making the sleeve of her kimono slide down to reveal a bandage wrapped around her slender right arm, just around the elbow. It looks like it’s only been recently applied.

“*Shiki*, that wound-“

Abruptly, *Shiki* stands up before I can finish my sentence. She avoids looking at me, deliberately staring at some far off place.

“If **Shiki**’s words aren’t getting through to you, then allow me to elucidate on them,” she says. “If this goes on, I will kill you.”

Now it was my turn to be surprised. I could muster no reply. Without even throwing away the plastic wrapping of her egg sandwich, *Shiki* leaves the roof and returns to the classroom. Left alone, I clean up the trash we both left behind.

“Now I’ve really done it. It’s just like Gakuto said.” It was all I could end up saying to myself. Because just like Gakuto said, I might really be an idiot. I couldn’t bring myself to hate *Shiki*, even after what she said. In fact, I think my mind just cleared up on the matter. At this point, there’s only one reason why I like being with *Shiki*.

“I’ve become crazy a long time ago.” If only I had realized it sooner. If only I had realized that I like *Shiki Ryōgi* so much, that I can laugh at being told about my eventual murder.

## The First Homicide Inquiry - IV

I wake up to a perfectly good Sunday morning, the first Sunday of February in fact. After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I head to the dining room, and am surprised to find Daisuke there, waiting for me. “Why are you here?” I ask, in the manner of my usual morning crankiness.

“Well, good morning to you, too. I missed the last train, so I came over for a while. I gotta go to work in a while, though. Savor school life while you’ve got it, Mikiya. When you grow up, working harder just translates to less vacations.” A yawn punctuates the last word in his sentence. His drooping shoulders and tired voice tell me just how much sleep he’s been getting. That only means two things: the investigation on the serial killer has either ground to a solid halt or they’ve gotten a new lead.

“Oh yeah, you were talking about coming to my school last time we talked. Did anything come of that?”

“Nothing, really. Lots of people lose school emblems, after all, and testing it turned up nothing on the offender database. But it might be back to your school for me.” He sighs, rubbing his eyes. “Truth is, a sixth body turned up three days ago. Signs of a struggle this time, which was different. The victim had long nails, and she probably clawed at her killer. Found about three centimeters of skin beneath the vic’s nails.”

Now this was surprising. I haven’t even heard about this on the TV or the papers. Yet, even in the face of such grim news, my mind couldn’t help but drift off to *Shiki* and the conversation we had recently. She’d been talking about

murder as well. A picture forms in my mind, of *Shiki* standing atop a bloody corpse, holding a knife...

“So that means the killer was wounded?” I blurt out.

“Um, yeah? Unless the victim was scratching her own damn self. Lab team thinks the skin is from the elbow, so I’d expect the killer’s nursing some pretty deep wounds thereabouts. The blood is being analyzed, and if it gets a match on the database, it’s checkmate.”

Daisuke stands up after that, says a quick goodbye, and leaves. I suddenly find myself without the power to stand up, and I collapse on one of the chairs. It was only three days ago when I talked with **Shiki** in the sunsetlit classroom, and the day after that, I could’ve sworn there was a fresh bandage on her elbow.

Past noon, I make up my mind. Just thinking and worrying about it isn’t going to do any good, so I figure if I ask *Shiki* herself, and she tells me she has nothing to do with the killings, then that’ll be enough. At the very least, it’ll do something to calm my nerves.

I rifle through my school’s student registry book, and find *Shiki*’s name and home address a few moments later. Her house is on the outskirts of town, and when I finally find it, the better part of the night had caught up with me. The Ryōgi estate’s periphery is populated by bamboo trees in every direction, a veritable forest, and the estate itself is built like an old 18th century mansion. The walls surrounding the grounds went on for so long, I don’t think I could have guessed the size of the place just by walking. I would’ve needed an airplane to get a better picture.

A path leads me through the bamboo forest to a large gate. The entire thing looks like a relic left over from the Edo era, but despite this, I find an intercom beside the gate, a little anachronistic quality that gives me some small relief. I push the button and state my business, and in under a minute, a black-suited man opens the gates and comes out to greet me. He looks like he’s in his early thirties, and seems about as high-spirited as a ghost would be.

“Welcome, young man.” he says with impeccably practiced politeness. “My name is Akitaka, a servant of the Ryōgi household and of the lady *Shiki*. Unfortunately, the lady is absent now and cannot meet you. If you would like,

you may enter the mansion and await her return.”

“Er...no, thanks. I think I’ll just come back another time.”

Truth is, I don’t think I have the courage to go inside the mansion alone. “As you wish. Goodbye, then.”

He goes inside the gates again, and it closes behind him with a sound of finality. Because it’s already dark, I decide to go home for today. I keep thinking about *Shiki*, and what she could be doing at such a late hour. I decide not to assume the worst. It’s the easiest way to a slippery slope of crippling anxiety.

The walk to the station takes me an hour, but right at the station entrance I meet my former upperclassman. He invites me to dinner in a restaurant, and, not being one to refuse, I go with him. We end up talking until the hour hand of my watch is pointed at ten o’ clock. Unlike my friend, I’m still a student, so I needed to get going soon. After saying goodbye to him, I buy a ticket for the train inside the station. The hour hand of my watch is creeping closer and closer to 11, but before I put the ticket on the turnstile, I allow myself to wonder, for a moment, if *Shiki* was home already.

“God, what the hell am I doing here?” I say to myself, while walking through the unfamiliar residential neighborhood. The streets are empty with no signs of life, unsurprising given the hour and the circumstances, but I tried to pay it no heed; *Shiki*’s house was nearby. I know I won’t be able to meet her now even if I went there. But still, I just want to see the lights on in her house, in her room, just to know that she’s there, so I’m taking this short side trip back to the Ryōgi estate.

The freezing winter air puts a strain on my shoulder muscles, and my ragged breath is keenly audible in the still night. Soon, the residential district is behind me and I face the tree line of the bamboo forest surrounding the Ryōgi estate for the second time tonight. The trees part for the little path that goes towards the front gate. No wind sings through the trees at this hour, and no light but the moon’s illuminates the path; far from making the forest less menacing, the silence only serves to accentuate my anxiety.

I wonder what would happen if I got attacked here. As soon as the thought enters my mind, I regret it immediately. Though I was only halfjoking with

myself, my brain is now working overtime to exaggerate the fleeting image, even as I try to put it out of my mind. When I was little, I was afraid of monsters. I mistook the silhouettes flitting to and fro in the midst of the bamboo trees for ghosts and other horrors. But now, I'm scared of other people, people who you imagine will just jump out from behind the brush and attack you. What age was I when I started to replace the ghosts with people?

Every step I take worsens the thought in my head, and I keep remembering the terrible image I saw when Daisuke told me about the recent murder. And while I try to exorcise that disturbing thought, I come across something in the path that makes my feet stop of their own volition.

A few meters ahead, a white shadow of a person was standing. Her kimono is so white it seemed as if to shine in the moonlight, but it is speckled and sullied with something, and it continues to spread over the kimono's surface. Something in front of her is spraying red liquid in all directions. Venturing forward a few steps, it becomes clear that the woman is *Shiki*. As for the object which I first took for some sort of fountain?

A corpse, its form too mangled and bloody to identify at first sight. Somehow, I'm neither shocked nor surprised. Perhaps it's because the same terrible premonition lingered in my thoughts just moments before, and in an instant, it turned into reality. Now my mind is blank.

The body is fresh, otherwise it wouldn't bleed profusely like that. The fatal wound starts at the neck, and continues down at an angle towards the body in a single, clean cut, like some macabre stole.

*Shiki* stares at the body, standing still like a statue.

The rich, red color of the spraying blood is enough to make me faint, but the organs seeping forth from the gaping wound makes the body look less like a human and more like a twisted facsimile of one made by someone mad. It repels and disgusts me so much that it's hard to look at.

Yet *Shiki* only continues to stare, unperturbed and placid.

Red butterflies take flight from the wound, and descend lightly on *Shiki*'s face, and on her ghostly kimono. Her blood-soaked lips twist into a shape... is it of fear, or of pleasure? Is she *Shiki* or **Shiki**? I try to say something, but my voice

stops, and I fall to the ground just because of the effort of trying to talk.

I vomit, my stomach retching out all its contents, all the bile. I wish it retched out this memory as well, but no such luck. I vomit so hard I start to cry. But that doesn't make me feel any more relieved. The overwhelming smell of the blood is so rich it drowns my brain. And finally, *Shiki* notices me. She turns her head to look at me, and I see now that the twist on her lips earlier was a smile, a kind of warm, motherly smile that is so at odds with the scene that it makes me shiver.

I can feel my consciousness start to leave me as she walks closer to me. Before I faint, she utters something at me.

“Do be careful, Kokutō. A terrible premonition echoes a terrible reality.” I guess I was too optimistic. I refused to even think about this outcome until I was face to face with it.

## The First Homicide Inquiry - V

I heard they found me lying on the ground near a puddle of my own vomit, awake but lying there dumbfounded. A patrolman spotted me and took me to a nearby station, where I was taken into questioning. Unfortunately, I was in a state of shock for about four hours, and they couldn't get anything out of me. I guess my brain isn't really prepared for that sort of thing. I don't know if anybody is. The time it took from the interview to them releasing me made it so that I couldn't make it to school anymore, so I decided to take a break today.

While the corpse was spreading blood profusely all over the place, I was lucky enough to be far away and so didn't have any blood spatter on me, so that (and the fact that I'm Daisuke's cousin) sped up the processing quite a bit. Right now, Daisuke is giving me a ride back home.

“So, you really didn’t see anyone, Mikiya?”

“I said I didn’t. What’s it gonna take for you to believe me, huh?” I find myself surprised at the annoyed tone I take, but Daisuke just seems to take it in stride.

“Alright, alright, I believe you. Fuck. I guess I should just be happy you’re alive; the killer wouldn’t have let you live if you’d seen anything. But goddamit. This case is still a stone-fucking-whodunit.”

“It’s a career case if you solve it, though.”

How sick am I, joking around with Daisuke like this? A voice in my head keeps whispering, *liar, liar*, and yet here I am lying with a straight face to a police detective who’d probably waste no second throwing me behind bars if he found out I was withholding information. Yet still, I didn’t say anything about

*Shiki* being in the scene of the crime.

“So, Mikiya, how was your first body?”

“Well, spilled my guts out, didn’t I? I never want to see another one again if I can help it.”

Daisuke gives a small chuckle and says “Yeah, I had that feeling too, first time around. Not every body that gets dumped in this city is like that, though, so you can rest easy.”

Oh. Well, sure, Daisuke, I’ll rest easy on the fact that at least not all dead bodies you get are horribly mutilated.

“But I didn’t know you were a friend of the Ryōgi girl, Mikiya. Small world.”

The knowledge of me befriending *Shiki* makes him smile for some unknown reason, which makes me just a little bit more nervous. On record, they chalked this recent incident up to the same killer as all the others, and they took my statement that I was there on the night of February 3rd only after the murder had happened and the suspect had taken off. Both the Ryōgi family and myself have said nothing about *Shiki*, even though they must know that I know by now.

“So did you investigate the family or something?” I ask Daisuke.

“Hey, I wanted to, seeing as the daughter, *Shiki*, goes to your school, but they didn’t want to for some reason, and I can’t go knocking down their door when I don’t have a charge against them. Not that that makes them automatically suspicious or anything, but the only thing they said to me was ‘what happens outside of our grounds is none of our business.’ Bunch of stuck up fools if you ask me.”

Strange. This combined with the fact that they stopped the investigation just outside the grounds of the Ryōgi family and didn’t even try to ask going in makes me think the Ryōgis have some sort of suction on the force. “You ask me, though, I don’t really think they had anything to do with it,” Daisuke says suddenly.

“Huh? Why?”

Even though I make light of him most of the time, the truth is, I have faith in

Daisuke's detective skills. He's cracked some tough nuts in the past, and it's undoubtedly made him a valuable asset to the homicide division, despite his lack of reluctance in sharing police information with his all too curious cousin. I thought for sure he'd be at least a little suspicious about *Shiki*.

"I just can't see why any one of them would want to suddenly kill people. There's no motive, at least not one I can see." Then his eyes lose their look of contemplation, and he smiles at me. "Besides, you don't see a girl like their daughter killing anybody, right? Too much of a looker for that to happen."

I sigh, and think fruitlessly at why such a carefree man is in such a grim occupation. "And that's why you'll be single for the rest of your life," I reply. "Say any more and I'll exercise my ability to lock you up for 24 hours without probable cause."

We don't talk for the rest of the ride, but I do agree with Daisuke, even without his "amazing" powers of intuition. I mean, strictly speaking, I didn't really see *Shiki* do anything, and I'm sticking to that one fact, even if she herself tells me otherwise.

Now I have something I need to do.

In retrospect, that was the last time for a long time that a murder like that happened. The elusive form and shape of the serial killer would not begin to become much clearer until three years later, and yet it all seems like a world apart to me now. But that was the first and last time that *Shiki* would ever face me with a look as frightening as she had that night.

/ 5

Just outside the grounds of our manor, in the stone path that led to the house, a murder took place.

My stroll on that night was a scattered recollection of waking moments and seemingly blank unconsciousness, a trend that has started only recently, but connecting the moments I do remember seems to lead me to the obvious conclusion as to what I did.

The disfigured corpse sprayed blood in every direction, and the very sight of the crimson liquid made my head spin and my knees weak. **Shiki** felt the same way, but I imagine for entirely different reasons. Worse, this person's blood was especially *beautiful*. The way the blood seeped and flowed through the little spaces in between the stones of the path seemed to me to be the most elegant thing I'd ever seen in my life.

Before long, I noticed that there was someone some distance behind me, retching at the spectacle before him, and when I turned my head to face him, it turned out to be Mikiya. I didn't know the reason why he would be there at that late hour, and I didn't even think about it at the time. After that, there was another spate of unconsciousness, but I think I remember returning to the mansion. I found out that the body was discovered much later, and strangely enough, there was no talk of me being there. Was the Mikiya I saw just a hallucination, some phantom dream designed by my mind? That man is too honest; there's no way he would lie to the police to cover up the real killer.

And why did it have to be done in front of my house?

“Was it you, **Shiki**?” I ask out loud, but no answer came from within or without. The rift of disconnection between me and **Shiki** grew stronger with each passing day. Even if I hand him control of myself, we both have to want something to do it. But why is it that recently, when **Shiki** is in control, my memory becomes misty and indistinct?

Maybe, just maybe, without me noticing, I’ve become just as insane as the other members of the Ryōgi dynasty.

*Jesus Christ, will you stop worrying? Here’s the thing: if you even so much as think you’re insane, it means you’re not.*

His voice comes to fore and berates me, but he’s right. Well, at least I’d like to think he’s right. Someone insane doesn’t question his own sanity. That at least gives me some comfort.

A knock comes from the door of my room, and the voice of Akitaka comes right after, interrupting my thoughts. “My lady, may I intrude for a moment?” I invite him inside my room, but he refuses due to the late hour. “Is there something the matter?” I ask.

“There seems to be someone keeping watch over the house.”

“But I heard that Father managed to drive all the policemen away.” Akitaka nods. “The police withdrew from further investigation of the premises since last night. This one is an entirely different matter, however.” “You may do as you please. I don’t care who it is, he or she has nothing to do with me.”

“But my lady, the one who is keeping watch seems to be your friend from school.”

Upon hearing that, I stand up from the bed and immediately make my way to the window in my room, with its clear overlooking view of the mansion gate. I pull back the curtain and look outside, keeping my eyes trained beyond the walls. Sure enough, there he was, a solitary figure silhouetted in between the trees. I don’t know whether to laugh or be disappointed at his laughable attempt at concealing himself.

“Only say the word and I will ask him to leave,” says Akitaka.

“No, not tonight, I think. Leave him and do him no harm. He isn’t causing any

trouble.”

I skip lightly across the floor back to my bed and lie down. Akitaka says a final formal “goodnight”, turns off the lights, and closes the door.

The next few minutes consist of me attempting and failing to fall asleep, as my mind keeps drifting back to the window and outside. With nothing to do, I give up and approach the window again, making sure he’s still there. And sure enough, he is.

Despite his brown duffle coat, Mikiya is visibly shivering from the cold air. White puffs of air emanate from his mouth with every breath as he keeps watch on the gate with only a thermos of coffee by his feet to keep him company.

Now there’s really no way that the Mikiya I saw in my fragmented memory was a dream. I can guess what he’s here for: to see if I’m really the killer. This could even be just a foolish attempt by him to keep the killer from ever doing it again; some sense of responsibility on his part as a witness. Watching him from this window while thinking, I bite a fingernail, as I am wont to do when angry. I guess there’s nothing else to do but force myself to sleep.

## / 6

I had already expected a less than customary greeting from Mikiya at school today, if any at all, so him saying...

“*Shiki*, wanna eat lunch together?”

...like nothing had happened is more than a little suspect. And as always, I go along with him. I feel like a pet being bribed to go the roof with food. I had already decided beforehand that I would try not to associate myself with him anymore, but I would be lying if I said that I didn’t want to know what he himself thought about that night. I took his offer for lunch thinking he would be the one asking me the obvious question, but he’s just thoroughly ignoring the elephant in the room with this one.

“Does your house really need to be that big? Last time I went there, you even had a butler of some sort.”

“Akitaka is more like my father’s private secretary. And I like to call him a caretaker rather than a servant, Kokutō.”

“So I guess there really are people like that, huh?” he says, bookending his sentence with a nervous laugh. His voice exhibits a noticeable quiver.

I can’t judge by his attitude whether or not he knows that we’ve realized he’s spying on the house, but still, even given the circumstances he’s acting too strange. There’s no way he couldn’t have seen me covered in blood given how close he was standing to the entire thing, but why is he still laughing and talking to me as if it was some big joke? Well, if he’s not talking about it, then it’s going to have to come from me.

“Kokutō, on the night of February 3rd, you were—“

“Can we not talk about it?” And just like that, he sweeps the question away.

“What exactly is it that **we can’t talk about, Kokutō?**”

Unbelievable. The slight shift in tone, the vocal mannerism, the slightly off-beat way I just pronounced his surname. For a second there, **Shiki** owned my voice. Even Mikiya noticed; it’s all right there on his face. Strange. That’s never happened before, and it stuns me momentarily. I take a halfsecond of time to compose myself, clear my throat, and continue. “Be frank with me. Why did you not tell anything to the authorities?”

“Because,” Mikiya answers, “I didn’t see anything.”

You liar. That can’t be true.

— that can’t be true because that night, **Shiki** approached you —

“You just happened to be there,” he continues. “That’s the only thing I saw at the very least. So I decided to believe you.”

You liar. If you believed me, why did you keep watch outside my house?

— **Shiki** drew closer, rain-speckled and blood-spattered — “Honestly, it’s hard for me to talk about right now. Once I have more confidence in myself and put it behind me, maybe I can hear what you have to say. But for now, just...please, let’s not talk about it.”

How I so wanted to look away from him, to run away from the honesty in his face. To me, it looked like it was accusing me of murder.

— **Shiki** stood over him, and there was no mistaking it. He wanted to kill Mikiya.

Even though I never wanted to kill him. He said he believed in me. If I could only throw away that impulse, if only I believed in myself, then maybe I could have been spared the taste of this strange new sadness.

I did my damndest to avoid Mikiya after that day. After two days, he gave up on talking to me too, but he still sits outside the walls of the mansion every night

without fail, for close to two weeks now. I admire his persistence, if nothing else. Under the chill of winter, Mikiya sits just a little inside the bamboo tree line outside of the grounds, watching the gate, and he does this until three o' clock in the morning. Every night I spy a look at him, and every night I bite a nail in annoyance. I guess he got his wish; because of him, I haven't been going out of the house at night lately.

At three o' clock in the morning, he always leaves not with a tired or worn out face, but with a smile. He isn't doing this to find out who the killer is. He said he trusted me, as if it was entirely natural to do so. He's doing this to prove, or otherwise convince himself, that I am innocent. That's why, when the dawn breaks, and he starts to leave, he smiles. Because nothing happened.

"I guess optimism is in his blood," I murmured quietly, one night while watching him. And it makes me think. Being with Mikiya makes me calmer, more at peace. Being with Mikiya fools me into thinking I'm one of his kind. Being with Mikiya makes me think I can actually go to his side of the world, a bright side of the world that I'll never be allowed into, a world that has no place for me. And with that dumb smile on his face, he tries to drag me in.

That's the real reason why I'm irritated at him. I've nursed a murderer inside me named **Shiki** for as long as I've lived, but Mikiya keeps showing me a better life, without **Shiki**, without the impulse of killing. But instead of making me happy, it just strengthens what I already know: that I am not normal, I don't belong.

*"I've survived being alone my entire life, but now you're proving to be a nuisance, Kokutō,"* I murmur out loud.

*I don't want to go insane.*

**I don't want to break.**

If he hadn't given me the dream, that small spark of hope of a normal life, everything would have turned out better for me.

March has just begun, and already the cold seems to be receding. After class, I stay in the classroom and look outside the window. It feels like forever since I last did so. Here, in this window, the world that I view from on high actually makes me feel secure. A view of a world that I can't reach doesn't make me entertain any illusions of reaching it.

And like a vision from older, better times, Mikiya enters the sunset bathed classroom in exactly the manner he used to do. **Shiki** always liked to talk to him like this. I did as well.

“I never thought I’d get invited by you again to talk after class,” Mikiya says. “Are you going to stop ignoring me now?”

“It’s because I realized I can’t go on doing that that I called you.”

His eyes twitch a moment in surprise. Even though **Shiki** is trying his best to overcome me and take over, I try to hold out long enough to say what I have to say to Mikiya.

“You said before that I’m not a murderer.” I can barely see Mikiya’s face against the bright red glow of the sunset, but I can see he’s disappointed that we had to talk about this. “Too bad. I am a murderer. You were at the scene of the crime, but why didn’t you tell anything to the police?” “Because there’s nothing for me to tell. You didn’t do anything, right?” “Even if I’m saying it to your face right now?”

He nods. “Hey, you’re the one that said that I should take everything you say with a grain of salt. There’s no way you were the one that did that. I’m sure of

it.”

“What are you so sure of? What do you even know about me? What part of me can you believe in?” Unintentionally, my anger at him grows. For his part, he gives me a half-baked smile.

“I don’t have any basis, but I trust you. See, I like you, so I want to keep on believing in you.”

And that makes me stop like I’d just run into a wall. Those words which are probably just nothing to him are the most that anyone has given me; happiness, and my destruction, in one sentence. This carefree man has given me the illusion of a time spent with someone, a better world that’s not for me. Because I know that if I ever get close to someone, **Shiki** will come out and kill him, because denial is the sole reason he exists. And because he cannot live without affirmation, I exist. But because I’ve never been close to anything in my entire life, I could live through the paradox. Now that I know the world he can give me, the more I wish for it, the more I realize that it’s a hopeless and impossible wish. It hurts me and I hate it, and for the first time ever, I hate Mikiya from the bottom of my heart for making me realize it.

And he laughs like it means nothing.

I can’t stand being here anymore. I can’t stand him. I see it now. This is how Mikiya will destroy me.

“You are a fool,” I declare.

“Yeah, I get that a lot.”

As the sunset slowly turns to dusk, I exit the classroom while I still can. Before I cross the doorway however, I do one last thing. With my back still turned, I ask Mikiya a question.

“Are you coming tonight?”

“What?” He sounds surprised. I guess he still doesn’t realize I watch his little vigils. He tries to wave it off, but I insist.

“Answer me, damn you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but if I feel like going to your house,

I will.”

And with that I leave him in the classroom, and exit the school grounds. Gray clouds dot the red horizon, and the low rumble of thunder sounds off in the distance. I guess it’ll be a rainy night tonight.

## The First Homicide Inquiry - VI

Only when the sun had finally retreated and it became dark, just as I was making my way to *Shiki*'s house, did the rain finally start to pour. Nice of it to wait like that. It isn't a torrential downfall, but it isn't a light drizzle either. The small, pattering sounds of the raindrops on the stone path, and on the leaves, and on my umbrella made this a night full of noise. The rain water itself is still cold, a leftover of the winter that the coming of March had not yet completely erased. Together with the bamboo leaves and trees as my sole companions tonight, I keep my eyes trained on the mansion and the gate. My umbrella hand is turning red, growing numb from the cold.

I sigh, a big long one. I can't keep this thing up forever, obviously. First thing, it feels like I'm a stalker. Second thing, it's doing a number on my ability to keep awake in class. I'm gonna give it another week, and then I'll probably call it quits. It'd be nice if the killer was caught in that time, though.

I should have thought it would be the rain that would make me give in. It kinda feels like the cold and the rain are double teaming me just to lay off the creepy stake outs.

I sigh, another long one. It's not the rain that has me depressed though, but today's verbal sparring with *Shiki*. "What part of me can you believe in?" she said. If she thinks I don't believe her, than what have I actually been trying to do all this time? Anyone could tell from her face this afternoon that she was agonizing over something. She even looked like she was ready to cry; that, or tell you off. You never can tell with her.

The rain doesn't look like it'll end soon. The raindrops make ripples even on the little puddles of water. If you can learn to selectively ignore the noise the raindrops are making, I'm sure it might even be a peaceful, serene night. But to me it's just noise. And yet, even in all that noise, a singular splash, a single footfall behind me reverberates across the bamboo brush. I turn around to see only a solitary figure in a red kimono. It was her.

She'd been out in the rain for a long time, that much was obvious. She was drenched from top to bottom, her short, black hair sticking to her cheeks and face, casting a dark shadow over her eyes.

"*Shiki.*" I make my way to her. She must have been out here since the rain started. Her red kimono is so damp it's sticking to her body, and her skin is so cold to the touch. I hold out my umbrella to cover the both of us while I rifle through my bag, searching for a towel.

"Here, wipe yourself with this." I extend my arm, towel draped over my hand. "What the hell are you doing out here in the rain when your house is right there?"

She takes one glance at my outstretched arm, and laughs a bitter, queer laugh. It is punctuated by a keening sound slicing through the empty night air.

"Wh..." It happened faster than my eye could see. I feel something warm in my arm, and instinctively take a step back. The red warmth in my arm is flowing downwards like a snake, splitting in two and dripping.

My arm?

A cut?

Why?

The pain pierces me, courses through my arm, hurting like nothing I've ever felt before. It makes me numb. No time to think. No time to even panic.

She takes a step forward, I take a step back. Calmly. Have to run. Have to get away.

No.

No time to get away. I move fast, but she is faster, like a monster. Another

keening sound, this time in my leg.

Red. Red mixes with the puddles in the path. My red blood, rippling outwards from the impact of raindrops. I see it, see the cut on my leg, feel the pain. I collapse, face-up, seeing the sky, the falling rain. My back hits the stone path. I gasp at the sudden impact.

She climbs on top of me, and points her knife at my throat. Calm. No time for panic. The noise of the rainfall retreats, ignored. Just calm.

I look up, and see the darkness of the sky, and her, set against that darkness. Her eyes are black and implacable, like an abyss, and I see myself reflected in that void.

I can feel the tip of the knife, just below my chin, steel cold to the touch like her skin. Like the blood on my leg, little water drops snake down her face, a face framed by her black hair; like a mask, it is blank, terrifying, and pitiful all at the same time.

“**Kokutō**, say something. Anything,” *Shiki* says. My last words. She wants to hear them. I look her straight in the eye, and speak with a wavering voice, desperately trying to keep calm.

“I...don’t want...to die.”

Somehow, I felt I wasn’t saying this to *Shiki*, but to the death that was now coming for me.

She smiles.

“I...I want to kill you.”

It was a very gentle smile.

## Epilogue

It's July 1998, and I celebrate a little in my head as I finish up the day's work early, just before lunch break. I say "work" but really, I'm just more of a secretary to Miss Tōko than anything, mostly doing the odd job she needs doing. I'm lucky to even get work at all, having dropped out of college halfway.

"Kokutō, isn't today your weekly visit?"

"Yes, ma'am. Soon as I finish this up, I'm going there right away."

"Oh, don't delay on account of me. You can go early. There's nothing more for you to do here today, anyway."

I have to say, Miss Tōko's temperament when her glasses are on is much more preferable. And after all, this is a good day for her too; since it's the day she cleans that car she's so proud of to an immaculate sparkle. She always likes doing that.

"Thanks, ma'am. I'll be back in about two hours."

"Bring me back a snack or two, all right?" She waves me a goodbye just before I close the door to her office.

*Shiki Ryōgi* is still in the hospital, still in a coma unable to do anything. I still go to visit her every Saturday afternoon. She never told me about any pain she was holding in, or anything she thought about. I don't even know why she tried to kill me. But at least she smiled in the end, even if it was a faint one. At least she smiled, and that was enough.

Gakutō had it right a long time ago. I was already crazy. I guess that's why I

am the way I am today even after a brush with death.

I still remember the last time we stood in the sunset lit classroom. Under that burning, blood red sky, *Shiki* asked me what part of her I believed in. And I still remember my answer.

*"I don't have any basis, but I trust you. I like you, so I want to keep believing in you."*

A premature answer, perhaps. I said I didn't have any basis, but the truth is, I did. I just didn't know it at the time. She didn't kill anyone. That, at least, I could believe in. Because *Shiki* knew how painful murder was. She, above all others, knew the suffering that the victim and the murderer went through.

That's why I believed: in *Shiki*, who couldn't express herself, in **Shiki**, who wasn't given a chance to be a person, in *Shiki*, who was far from pain, and in *Shiki*, who knew nothing but pain.

**THE THREE PIECES NOW LIE POISED ON THE BOARD.**

***ONE A MIND ENTWINED WITH A SPECTER FLOATING, AND ON DEATH, DEPENDENT.***

***ONE A LIFE IN PARADOX ETERNAL, AND IN DEATH, PLEASURE.***

***ONE A PREDATOR WITH ORIGIN AWAKENED, AND TO DEATH, GNOSIS.***

**THREE NOW SWIRL AND DANCE, AND IN THE SPIRAL OF CONFLICT THEY WAIT.**





3  
痛覚残留

# *Linger<sup>ing</sup> Pain*

ever cry, never life.

When I was little, I played house a lot. I had a pretend family, with a pretend pet, a pretend kitchen, and I would cook pretend food.

But one day, a real blade had accidentally been mixed up in the artificial, pretend ones.

I had never seen a toy that sharp before, and I used it to play, and in the process cut myself deeply between the fingers.

I approached my mother with red soaked palms outstretched, and I remember her scolding me for it, then crying and embracing me, saying “I know it hurts, but we’ll fix it,” over and over again.

It was not her consolation that made me happy, but her embracing me, and so I started to cry as well.

“Don’t worry, Fujino. The pain will go away once the wound heals,” she said while wrapping a bandage around my hand.

At the time, I didn’t understand what she was trying to say.

Because not even for a moment did I feel any pain.

## Lingering Pain

“Well, she certainly has her way of introducing herself,” the professor remarks.

The university science lab has that synthetic smell of chemical disinfectants that reminds me more of hospitals. But the laboratory equipment dispels any notion of that quickly. As does the white-coated professor who Miss Tōko sent me to meet today, who now displays a reptilian smile of full white teeth while offering a handshake. I take it.

“So you have an interest in parapsychology, eh?” he asks.

“Not really. I just want to know some minor things about the topic.” “And that’s what you call ‘interest.’” He wrinkles his nose, satisfied at his show of wit. “Well, it doesn’t matter anyway. I’d expect nothing less from her associate. I mean, she asks you to hand her business card as an introduction. She was always a unique one, and talented. I wish our university had more students of her caliber.”

“Er...yes, I’m sure your student problems are important.” I’m starting to see where Miss Tōko gets her ability to ramble so much from. “But I was asking about—“

“Ah, yes, yes, parapsychology. There are many different phenomena that fall under that label. Our university doesn’t really deal with it, however. I’m sure you can understand when I say it’s treated as quack science by most in my field. There are very few universities here in Japan still giving grants for parapsychology studies. Even so, I’ve heard a few have had some marginal successes, though the actual details don’t really—“

“Yes, professor, I’d imagine those studies are fascinating, but I’m more interested in how people end up having them in the first place.”

“Well, to simplify, you can liken it to a card game. You play card games, don’t you? What card game is the most popular right now?”

I scratch my head, deciding to go along with this man’s logic. “Erm... poker, I guess?”

“Ah yes, poker. I’ve had my own fond memories with that game.” He clears his throat for a moment, then moves on. “Let us say that human brains are all playing a game. Your brain and mine are playing poker. Most everyone else in society is playing poker as well. There are other games, but we can’t play them. Everyone is in consensus that poker is the game we have to play, because that’s how we define being normal. Are you following me so far?”

“So you’re saying that everyone plays a boring card game?”

“But see, that’s what makes it better for everyone. Since everyone plays poker, we’re protected by arbitrary, but absolute rules of our own creation, and thus we can live in a peaceful consensus.”

“But if I’m getting you right, you’re saying the other games aside from poker aren’t so clear cut?”

“We can only speculate. Say some other minds are playing a game with rules that have an allowance for plants to communicate, and maybe other minds prefer a game that has rules that say you can move a body other than your own. These are not the same games as poker. They have their own consensus, their own rules. When you play poker, you play by its rules, but those playing by the rules of other games don’t conform. To them, poker doesn’t make a lick of sense.

“So you’re saying that people not ‘playing poker’, so to speak, have some mental abnormalities?”

“Exactly. Consider a person that knew no other game than the game where you could communicate with plants. In the rules of his game, he talks to plants, but he can’t talk to people. People who see him then brand him as crazy and put him in the funhouse. If he really could talk to plants, then that’s a person with paranormal abilities right there: a person that plays a different game, follows

different rules, than the game society plays. However, I'd imagine most people with these sorts of abilities are still capable of switching their mindsets, so that they can still live mostly unnoticed in society.”

“Which makes the person that only plays the game where you can talk to plants a crazy person, since he lacks the shared subconscious experience and consensus inherent in playing poker, am I right? If he only knows the other game, and can't switch between the two, then he's considered mentally damaged.”

“That's right. Society calls these people serial killers and psychopaths, but I would phrase them more appropriately as ‘living paradoxes’: People who, because they play by irregular rules of reality, make their existence itself a contradiction to reality. People who shouldn't be able to exist, who can't exist.” He pauses for a half beat to collect himself, then added. “This is all hypothetical, of course.” As if he needed to say it.

“Of course, professor. Is there any way to correct a living paradox like you said?”

“You'd have to destroy the very rules they play by within their minds. But destroying the brain just equates to killing them, so there's really no easy way, or really no other way but to kill them. No one can just suddenly alter a state of mind or ability like that. If there was, then that person him self would also be playing a different game with different rules. Something like solitaire. I hear that game has some pretty complex rules in it.”

The professor laughs heartily, apparently immensely amused at his own joke. I can't say I share the sentiment.

“Thanks, professor. You've helped loads. I suppose now I know what I'll do when I encounter psychokinetic people.” I say it only half sarcastically. “Psychokinesis? Like bending spoons, things like that?”

Oh, brother, here we go again. “Or heck, why not a human arm?” That one was less of a joke.

“If we're going by spoon bending, then you have nothing to fear. The force required to bend a spoon would take days to distort a human arm. If there was someone who could bend an arm, I suggest a hasty withdrawal.” Now that he

mentions it, now's probably the right time for a hasty withdrawal myself. "I'm sorry to cut this short, professor, but I really need to go. I have to get to Nagano, and I'd like to do it today. Sorry for eating up too much of your time."

"Oh, no, it's quite alright. Any friend of hers is a friend of mine. Come by any time you need to. And send my regards to Aozaki, won't you?"

Fujino Asagami, still in a state of confusion and disorientation, pulls herself up in the middle of a darkened room. The silhouettes of people standing and milling about, once so familiar, are now gone. The light isn't turned on. No, not quite right. There was no light in the first place, and darkness stretches all over the room, with nary a peek or a beam of light seeping in.

She exhales a long sigh, and brushes her long, black hair lightly with trembling fingers. The loose tassel of hair she once hung lazily on her left shoulder is now gone, probably cut off by the man with the knife while he was on top of her. After remembering that, she slowly surveys the room around her.

This is—was—an underground bar. Half a year ago, this bar ran into financial difficulties, and it was abandoned. Not long after, it became just another abandoned establishment blending in the dying city, a haunt for various delinquents and robbers. Much of the effects from its better days still lay forgotten inside. In the corner rests a banged up pipe chair. In the middle of the room, next to Fujino, is a single pool table. Everywhere in the room, convenience store food is scattered in rotting, half-finished piles with cockroaches scrabbling all over the remains, and a mountain of garbage is stacked haphazardly to one side. In a corner, a bucket is almost filled with urine, a communal container to compensate for the lack of a working toilet. The combined stench of it all is potent, and almost makes Fujino vomit.

With no light and no way to know where you are, this dark, secluded ruin could have been in a skid row of some far off country for all anyone knows. One wouldn't even think there was a normal city on the other side of the door on the

top of the stairwell. The faint smell of the alcohol lamp those men brought here is the only thing that maintains any sense of normalcy.

“Umm...” Fujino mumbles. She looks around slowly, as if this scene is completely routine. Her body had gotten up from the pool table, but her mind still has some catching up to do.

She picks up a nearby wrist, flesh showing tears and seemingly twisted off from the arm. Wrapped lovingly and securely around it is a digital wristwatch, and in glowing green text, it shows the date: July 20, 1998. The time: 8:00pm, not even an hour after what happened.

All at once, Fujino is assailed by sudden, blinding pain in her abdomen, and she lets slip a strained grunt. She staggers from the ache, and barely stops herself from falling face first to the floor by supporting herself with her hands. As soon as her palms touch the floor, she hears a soft splash. Remembering that it had been raining today, she realizes that the whole room is flooded with water...and something else.

She takes a moment’s glance at her abdomen, and sees the distinct spatter of dried blood—right in the place where those men stabbed her.

The man who stabbed Fujino was a familiar face to anyone in this part of town. He seemed to be the ringleader of a crew that consisted of high school dropouts and various drifters of similar minds and motivations. They did what they felt: stick-ups, assault, robbery, arson, drugs, you name it. They plied their trade in the forgotten maze of backlanes between the buildings of the commercial district, where no neon glow or curious glance could ever reach. They emerged from these alleys to the harsh lights of the peopled avenues for only short intervals, to catch their victims through coercion or force and had their twisted entertainment for the night. It is on one such normal night that this crew and Fujino crossed paths.

It was a perfect setup. A student of Reien Girl’s Academy, and quite good looking, Fujino became a prime target for the men. Perhaps fearing public vilification, Fujino never told anyone of how she was victimized. This fact eventually reached the ears of the men, however, after which whatever hesitance they might have had about being found out disappeared. They raped her again

and again, bringing her to this underground bar after school. Tonight was supposed to be another routine night, like always, but their leader apparently got tired of just doing Fujino.

He brought out a knife, probably to bring something a little new to the table. He'd felt offended by what Fujino did: how she just lived her days as if they hadn't done anything to her at all, as if what they did to her didn't humiliate her. He felt he needed more proof of Fujino's humiliation and his dominance. And he needed just that little bit of violence, that little ounce of extra pain for that, hence the knife.

But Fujino didn't even react, her face a blank expression, even when he had a knife ready to dig deep in her face. This made him truly incensed. He pushed her down to the table, and got to work.

Casting her eyes downward, Fujino looks at her blood-soaked clothes and thinks: *I can't go out looking like this.*

Her own spilt blood is concentrated only on her abdomen, but she's soaked in their blood from head to toe. *How stupid of me to get dirtied like this.* Her foot hits one of their scattered limbs on the floor, and it gives a little shake in response. She considers her options.

If she waits one more hour, the number of pedestrians will start to dwindle. And the fact that it's raining only helps. It's summer, so it's not too cold. She'll just let the rain wash some of the blood off her, and go to a park and clean herself up there.

After coming to this conclusion, she calms down. Walking away from the dark pool of water and blood, she takes a seat at the pool table, taking a count of the scattered limbs to find out how many corpses are lying on the floor.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

*Four. Four. Four? No matter how many times I count, it only comes down to*

*four! A mix of astonishment and terror. One is missing.*

“So, one of them managed to escape,” Fujino murmurs to herself. She lets slip a small sigh.

*If so, I'll be caught by the police. If he'd already run to a station, I'll be arrested for sure. But could he really tell the police? How would he be able to explain what just happened? Would he tell them how they kidnapped and violated me, and told me to shut up? He'd need a cover story. And none of them were ever smart enough for that.*

She lights the alcohol lamp on the billiard table to get a better view. Its flickering orange glow illuminates the entire room, making the shadows twirl and dance. The story of violence in the room is quite visible now: sixteen arms, sixteen legs, four torsos, four heads, and wet blood spatters in every direction. Fujino is unfazed by the brutality of the scene before her. No time to think on that. After all, the count was missing one, which meant she still had something to do.

*Do I have to take revenge?*

Her body trembles as if to reinforce her lack of conviction. No more killing, she tries to tell herself, as earnestly as she possibly can. But she remembers what they did to her, and what they could do to her if she doesn't permanently shut the mouth of the one who escaped. Her body trembles again, not in anger, but in something else. Delight? A relishing of what is to come? And, for the moment at least, what doubt lingers in her mind vanishes.

On Fujino's blood tinted reflection on the floor, a little smile plays across her face.

## **Lingering Pain - I**

July is about to end, but not before it dumps a lot of business in my plate. Starting from my friend who, comatose for two years, has finally regained consciousness, to finishing my second big job since dropping out of college and working for Miss Tōko, and even having my sister who I haven't seen for five years coming here to Tokyo for a visit, I've had little time to even stop and take a breath. I don't know if starting my nineteenth summer like this is the good earth's way of saying "nice job" or "Mikiya Kokutō needs to be screwed over with greater frequency."

Tonight is one of those rarest of nights, my night off, so I went with some of my old high school friends to go drinking. And before I could so much as glance at an hour hand, I'd noticed it was late and the train had long since made its last run, leaving me with few commuting options to go back home. Some of my friends took taxis home, but since my payday was held off till tomorrow, my budget can't cooperate. Left without a choice, I decided to walk back home. Fortunately, my house was only two stations and a block or two away, not too far a distance.

It was the 20th of July up until a few minutes ago. In the midnight of the 21st, I find myself walking in the shopping district, which, seeing as tomorrow is a weekday, sees little foot traffic at this hour. It had rained particularly hard tonight. Luckily, it stopped just as me and my friends were going home for the evening, but the asphalt, still wet, is emitting its potent petrichor smell, and my footsteps make little splashes on the scattered puddles of the streets and sidewalks.

While the above 30 degree Celsius temperature and the humidity of the rain work to make this the most miserable stroll in recent memory, I come across a girl, crouching on the sidewalk and putting pressure on her stomach with her hand like she was in pain. That black school uniform she's wearing is one I'm familiar with. The uniform, made to resemble a nun's habit, is the school dress of that academy of ladies of refined taste and upright morals, the Reien Girl's Academy. Gakuto jokes that half the reason for Reien's popularity is precisely because of the uniform. Not that I'm one that goes in for that kind of thing; I only know it because my sister Azaka studies there. I know they're a boarding school, though, which makes that girl's presence here at this late hour doubly suspicious. Or maybe she's just some delinquent that doesn't like to follow school regulations.

Seeing as she's from my sister's school, I decide to lend a helping hand. When I call out a simple "hello" to her, she turns to face me, and her black hair, wet from the rain, sways when she does. I see her gasp once, though quite silently, as if trying to suppress it. Her face is small, with sharp features. She wears her long hair straight down her back, and it separates around her right ear to form a tassel that goes down to her chest. It seems there is supposed to be a similar tassel on her left ear but it looks like it's been cut. That, along with her bangs, cut straight and clean in the school prescribed manner, makes me think she's the daughter of some rich, well-to-do family with an eye for proper grooming standards.

"Yes, what is it?" Her voice is faint and her face is equally pale. Her lips are tinted purple, the mark of someone with cyanosis. With a hand on her stomach, she's trying her best to look at me normally, but the little muscle movements and the folds in the face that mark a person in pain are obvious.

"Does your stomach hurt?"

"No, er...that is, I...I mean..." She's pretending to be calm, but she's already stumbling all over her words. She looks fragile, like she could suffer from a mental break down at any moment, not unlike Shiki when I first met her.

"You're a long way away from Reien Academy, lady. Miss the train? I could call a taxi for you."

"No, you don't need to. I don't have any money anyway."

“Yeah, join the club.” Before I’d realized it, I’d already given her an impolite answer. Try to salvage this one, Mikiya. “Yeah...so I guess you must live near here huh? I heard it was a boarding school but you probably have some special dispensation to go out.”

“Not really. My house is quite far.”

Right. Scratch that.

“So what are you, a runaway?”

“Yes, I think that’s the only thing I can do right now.”

Oh, man, that means trouble. I just noticed that she’s soaked right through. Maybe she couldn’t find an umbrella or a shade the whole time it rained, because she is dripping wet all over. The last time I was face to face with a girl soaking wet in rain, I almost got killed, so I guess that’s why I’m so awkward around this girl now. You never can trust girls in rain. Still, it’ll be a waste of time if I don’t help her now.

“So, you want to sleep over at my place just for tonight?”

“...can I?” she asks, still crouching and looking desperately at me. I nod. “I have a place all to myself, but I’m not making you any guarantees. I’m not planning on doing anything questionable that might offend your person, and as long as you don’t do any funny business, we can keep it that way. If that’s fine with you, then you can follow me. Now, since my employer, in her infinite wisdom, has decided to delay my paycheck, I can’t give you much money, but I do have painkillers for whatever’s bothering you.”

She looks happy and smiles. I extend a hand to her to help her up, and she gently grasps it and stands. I notice, for a moment, that there are red stains on the sidewalk where she was sitting.

Taking her with me, I start to lead her back to my apartment and get us both out of this wretched night.

“There’s a short walk ahead of us. Tell me if you’re having a hard time. I can at least be burdened with one girl on my back.”

“You needn’t worry. My wound has already closed up so it doesn’t really hurt anymore,” she says. The hand that she has yet to remove from pressing on her stomach, however, says otherwise.

“Does your stomach hurt?” I ask again, as much for her own peace of mind as mine.

She shakes her head, saying “no.” After that, we continue to walk, and she keeps her silence for some time. But after walking for a few more minutes, she nods.

“Yes, it...it really hurts. Is it...all right for me to cry?” When I nod an affirmative, her face turns into an expression of contentment. She closes her eyes, looking like she’s dreaming.

She hasn’t really told me her name, and I haven’t told her mine, and I feel it’s more appropriate that it stay that way. As soon as we reach the apartment, the girl asks me if she can use the shower, to which I say yes. She also wants to dry her clothes, so with the lame excuse of buying a pack of smokes, I vacate myself from the premises for an hour to give her some time. Man, and I don’t even smoke the damn things.

After an hour, I come back to find her already exploiting the living room sofa by sleeping on it. With all indications pointing to tons of work tomorrow, I decide to make good what little time I have left for sleep. I set my alarm clock to 7:30am, and I’m off to bed. Before falling asleep, I take one last look on her uniform, and can’t help noticing it has the littlest of tears, just around her midsection.

I wake up the next morning to find her sitting in the living room doing nothing. Apparently she was waiting for me to get up. Once she sees me awake, she gives a quick bow.

“Thank you for what you did last night. I don’t have any way to repay you, but I can at least thank you.” She stands up and makes for the door.

“Wait up, wait up.” I call after her while rubbing my eyes awake. I can’t have her leave just like that when she waited for me to get up. “I can at least get you a

breakfast.”

That stops her. Food must really get to her. As I thought, she’s just as hungry as anyone else would be after her ordeal last night. Now then, I’ve got some pasta and olive oil at the ready, which makes spaghetti the obvious choice for breakfast. I quickly whip up two portions of it and carry it to my dinner table, and we eat it together. Since it seems like she’s not in a talking mood, I turn on the TV to watch some morning news. It’s the usual diet of homicide in the city, but this one gave me a strange feeling.

“Ah, strange whodunits with a tinge of the weird. Just the kind of news that Miss Tōko would love.” If I had said that in the office, I’d probably already be smacked upside the head with a projectile shoe. But the news item is bizarre.

The reporter on the scene told the story. Seems four bodies were found in an underground bar that had been abandoned for a half a year. All four of them had had their limbs torn off, and the crime scene was filled with blood. The scene is pretty close by, maybe four stations or so away from where we were drinking last night.

I make a mental note of the fact that the news said that their limbs were “torn off” and not “cut off.” Regardless, the news has nothing more on that angle, and goes on to describe the details on the victims’ lives: all teenagers, and delinquents who frequently hung around the neighborhood. It seems they were slinging drugs too; corner boys. They have a citizen on the mike now, commenting on the victims.

“Those kids knew what they were getting into, and they got it. I think they deserved to die.”

And with those words, I turn the TV off. I hate it when people say those things, and I hate it even more when the media goes out of its way to give people like that the time of day. I turn back to look at my guest only to find her with a hand on her stomach just like last night. She hasn’t even touched her food. There really must be something wrong with her stomach. She looks down, such that I can’t see her face.

“Nobody deserves to die,” she says in between ragged breaths, causing her next words come out in whispers. “Why does it still throb? It’s already healed

over, but why—“

Suddenly, she stands up not altogether calmly, making the chair fall to the floor with a noise, and runs to the door. I start to stand up to go after her, but with head still cast downwards, she raises a palm towards me, as if to say I shouldn't come near her.

“Wait, calm down. I think I can—”, I start to say, but she cuts me off. “No, please. Now I know...I can never go back.” That face—a face of pain and resistance, a face of contradiction—somehow reminds me of Shiki. The girl calms down a bit, bows deeply before me, and then turns the doorknob.

“Goodbye,” she says. “I hope we don’t see each other again, for both our sakes.”

Then she opens the door and runs out. The last thing I see is her eyes, because she looked like she was about to cry.

## Lingering Pain - II

After my guest leaves as suddenly and unexpectedly as I found her, I try to push it out of my mind. She was just a normal girl I found in the street and, in a spark of altruism, decided to help. She had some kind of pain, though, that much I can be sure, but the how eludes me at the moment. Still, no need for me to think on it more than that. She's gone, and there's nothing I can do about it. More importantly, I'm going to be late for work if I don't hurry. As soon as I finish up my morning rituals, I'm out the door instantly.

The place I work in isn't exactly what you'd call a "company", not in any official capacity anyway. My employer is an eccentric sort of woman, the kind of woman who buys an abandoned building only halfway finished and makes it her office; a woman in her late twenties, a collector of old, obscure trinkets, purveyor of ambiguous counsel, and all around weirdo, Miss Tōko Aozaki.

Ostensibly, she's a maker of dolls and puppets, but she seems to dabble in all manner of engineering and architectural work as well. These are, of course, her hobbies. I may have complaints about how she runs the place, but she's managed to keep this little enterprise of hers running before I was there so she must be doing something right. Besides, I'm not about to challenge the wisdom of my one and only source of income, especially when I don't have a degree in a time when actual job pickings are slim. In fact, I should consider myself lucky to find any kind of work at all.

The building, which in the middle of my musings I have managed to reach, is a four story structure, with the office at the top. Nestled between the industrial district and the housing projects, it projects a feeling of emptiness and solitude,

like it doesn't belong. The longer you stare at it, the longer you gain this feeling of imposition, and going inside would be the last thing on one's mind. The building lacks modern 21st century luxuries such as elevators, so I start to climb the staircase.

As I enter the room, one person alone sits atop Miss Tōko's desk, a girl that looks decidedly out of place among the stacks of discarded papers and blueprints scattered all across the room. The girl in a fish-patterned indigo blue kimono turns her head at my entrance, looking at me with listless eyes, and I address her.

"Wait a minute. Shiki? What are you doing in this miserable dump?" "Um, Kokutō? The owner of the place is right behind me, pal," she says in a tone of warning, while pointing behind her with her thumb.

Shiki moves aside to reveal Miss Tōko seated across the desk, a lighted cigarette positioned in her mouth, and sharp eyes burrowing into me with pointed glares. She wears the same simple pattern of white blouse and black pants, a combination she has upheld so religiously since the day I met her that you would think she'd wear the same thing at a funeral. She always seems obliged to wear at least one orange-colored accessory though, and today it is a single orange earring.

"Yeah, I'd say goodbye to your paycheck if I were you," Shiki adds. I gulp. "Hmph. The Lord Tōko Almighty forgives you for your transgression since you arrived here earlier than I expected. Seriously, Kokutō. I told you there wouldn't be anything for you to do for a while so it's okay to show yourself around noon, and yet here you are."

"Miss Tōko, you know I'm not that kind of person." I can feel my wallet practically coaching me the words in my head. It's gets a bit lonely in there with only the stored value train ticket and phone card keeping each other company. "So, why is Shiki in this miserable dump?"

"Called her in. Thought there was a little business matter she could help me with."

For her part, Shiki seemed uninterested and withdrawn. She probably went out last night again, since she's rubbing one of her eyes. It's barely been a month since she recovered from her coma. We still find it hard to talk to each other, but

we're taking it slow for now. Since she doesn't seem to be interested in talking to me right now, I sit myself down on my desk. With no real work to finish, there's nothing to do but chat.

"Did you happen to see the news this morning, Miss Tōko?"

"You're talking about the news on Broad Bridge, right? I keep saying it, but Japan doesn't need a bridge that big, goddamit."

What Miss Tōko is talking about is none other than the big ten kilometer bridge construction project scheduled to finish next year. This part of town is about a twenty minute drive away from the city port, a short distance. The port is situated in a crescent shaped coastline that forms a bay, and the bridge is planned to cross the gap between the extreme upper and lower parts of that crescent coastline in one straight highway, supposedly to divert traffic from the coast. The city's development council made a joint venture with some big construction company to "answer the complaints of the community." And of course, considering the history of the local government, a public works project that big has to have some taxpayer's money mysteriously disappearing into people's pockets. It's a typical story: the government makes public development projects to answer some new "problem" the citizens have, which doesn't exist except in their heads, and everyone gets money. Worse, it's going to have its own aquarium, a museum, and a gigantic parking lot for God knows what reason; you don't know if the place is a bridge or some weird amusement park. The locals had been calling it the Bay Bridge since it started, but going from what Miss Tōko said, I suppose it's been officially christened as the Broad Bridge. It goes without saying that Miss Tōko and I do not hold this project in high esteem.

"Well, yeah, you say that, but I thought you already had an exhibit space there?" I comment wryly.

"That was just a complementary 'thank you' from the company. If it were up to me, I'd sell it, but how do you think it would look for Asagami Construction if I, the designer, refused the offer? But it's a stupid location, and it won't make me a lick of cash."

Uh oh. She's talking about deficit again. This has to be going somewhere I don't like. I have to find out about this now or else she's never going to give me

the money.

“Um, Miss Tōko? About the cash. Pardon me for being so blunt with it but, you had promised me my salary today and—“

“Oh, yeah,” she stretches the word out in a long drawl. “That. Unfortunately, I’m going to have to postpone your pay for a month.” She spits it out like an unwanted curse, as if I was the one at fault for asking in the first place.

“But you had a million or some yen wired to your account yesterday! How could it all be gone?”

“I spent it, how else?” Miss Tōko rebuts nonchalantly, sitting in her chair and swiveling it from side to side making squeaking noises and adopting the general annoying air of feigned ignorance one receives from self-important people. Shiki and I just affix her with frustrated stares.

“But what on Earth could you spend that much money on?” I cry in outrage.

“Oh, nothing, just a silly little thing. A Victorian era Ouija board to be precise. I don’t know if it works or not, but the hundred year value it has makes it fetch a high price. And if it’s a numina container, then so much the better. It’ll be a nice addition to my collection.”

I can’t believe how she’s taking all of this in stride. It would have been a lot more convenient if she was just some two-bit illusionist with some hand tricks, but her actual sideline is being a mage; like, the real deal. Which is why she can talk all about esoteric topics such as “numina” or whatnot while keeping a totally straight face. And yet she can’t even use her magic to make up some convenient excuse for my lack of pay.

“Come on, Kokutō, even you couldn’t have resisted the bargain price.

Don’t be so mad. At least now our wallets finally have something in common.”

Having been shown by her what miracles mages are capable of doing, I was willing to be tolerant in how she handled things, but this was way too much. “So that’s it, then? No pay for me this month?”

“Yep. All employees are to find other means of obtaining funding.”

I stand up, and make my way towards the door. “Then, you’ll excuse me for

leaving early, since I'm gonna have to beg, borrow, or steal money to get by this month?"

"Early in, early out, huh? Just don't get caught stealing or I'll feel guilty." Then, she switches to a serious tone, as if to indicate the gravity of what she was about to say. "By the way, Kokutō. I've got a favor to ask you." Thinking it's the business between her and Shiki, I try to listen as hard as I can.

"What, Miss Tōko?"

Then smiling, she says "Can you spare me some money? I'm pretty broke."

I pinch my thumb and forefinger together in front of me and say, "This close to resignation."

I close the door with resentment; cutting off Miss Tōko's playful chuckling soon after.

# / 1

After witnessing the amusing exchange between Tōko and Mikiya, Shiki at last speaks her mind.

“Tōko, you were saying before we were interrupted?”

“Ah, right. I didn’t really want to take a job like this, but money comes first. If only I were an alchemist, then I wouldn’t have to worry so much about living expenses. Damn Kokutō for not sharing some of that money I know he saves over,” Tōko says with indignation. She extinguishes her cigarette on the ashtray. Mikiya is probably thinking something similar himself, Shiki thinks.

“Well, about that incident last night—“ Tōko starts saying.

“I don’t need to hear any more on that. I get it, for the most part.”

“That so? Crime scene description only, and you can already read this girl? Sharp one, aren’t we?” Tōko looks at Shiki with eyes laden with meaning. Tōko has only described the details of the crime scene to Shiki, and yet Shiki understands that the girl’s story is writ large all over that vivid scene: proof, if anything, of her natural intuition when it comes to these matters. Tōko knew she’d understand; they come from the same dirty side of the world, after all.

“Our benefactor for this job has an idea who the target is. If you encounter her, orders are to try and see if she goes along quietly. But if she shows any willingness to fight back, any at all, then oblige her. ‘Least you’ll see if those blade skills of yours have rusted some.’”

“I see.” Shiki’s only answer. To her, the job was simple. Hunt her down, and

kill her. “What do we do about the body?”

“If you kill her, then the client has the means to make this look like an accident. Don’t worry about the fallout on this one. She’s dead to the world, as far as our client is concerned. Got no moral qualms about killing dead people, right?” Tōko gives a little laugh. “So, you in on this? You ask me, it’s tailor made for you.”

“I don’t even need to answer that.” Shiki starts to walk towards the exit. “You’re eager to start. Are you spoiling for blood that much, Shiki?” She doesn’t answer.

“Hey, you forgot this.” Tōko tosses a folder at Shiki. “Some photos and the particulars on her profile. What the hell are you going to do without even knowing what she looks like?” Shiki doesn’t catch the folder, and it falls harmlessly to the floor.

“I don’t need a file on this one. You’ve told me where it started, and that’s where we’re gonna start too. We’re all the same, us murderers: we attract each other. And when me and this girl meet, there’s definitely going to be some blood on the floor afterwards.”

And with a rustle of clothes, Shiki departs from the office, the coldness of her glare the last thing peeking in through the small gap of the closing door.

## **Lingering Pain - III**

Though I really didn't want to resort to this, I am left without any other alternative. I decide to contact an old high school friend to see if I can borrow some money. I know what places he haunts. I go to the university I dropped out of not two months ago and wait for him in the cafeteria. Just a few minutes after noon, right on schedule, the large, imposing shadow of Gakuto comes into view, easy to pick out among the crowd smaller than him. Spotting me, he swaggers on over to my table.

"Well, look who decided to come back! How you hangin', man? Here to stay for good this go around?"

"Unfortunately, no. School treating you well?"

"Ah, you know, this here's a game that needs to be played, so I play it. How about you? If I know you like I know you, you ain't gonna holler at me just for a social call. What's the trouble? How'd that job hunt go?" "Great, actually. Got a job."

"So what's wrong?"

"The job," I reply dryly. "My generous employer has decided that she'll forego the usual paycheck this month, so that leaves me hanging in the wind."

Gakuto makes a face halfway between disappointment and genuine bemusement. "That ain't so bad, man. And here I was thinking it was gonna be some profoundly life changing shit, and you drag your broke ass all the way down here for extra dough? You sure you're not some alien in disguise?"

“Very funny. When you’ve got your back against a corner like this, you can expect the same hospitality.”

“But to have money being the first thing out of your mouth; it just ain’t like you. And anyway, ain’t your folks supposed to have your back on this one?”

“Me and my parents haven’t talked since the big fight we had when I stopped going to university. How can I go back to them right now like this? It’d be like surrendering.”

“You got as thick a head as me sometimes, I give you that. Now, don’t tell me you called your folks names and shouted in their faces or something?” “I’ll thank you to leave that out of the discussion and focus on the real topic. So are you gonna lend me some or aren’t you?”

“Damn, man, you in a fighting mood today. But there ain’t no need to be, ‘cause I’m feeling awful generous. Plenty from our school called you a friend back then, Mikiya, and that includes me. If I put it out that you’re in need of cash, we’d all be pitching in to help. So don’t worry, man. We got your back.” Gakuto pats me on the shoulder. “Don’t misunderstand, though, this ain’t charity,” he adds. “Friends gotta look out for each other, after all.”

Seems Gakuto’s got his own favor to ask as well. He looks over the crowd carefully to see if no one is listening in, then leans his head in closer to me and whispers.

“The short of it is that there’s some youngin I want you to look for. Old junior from back in the day, actually. Seems he gone and had his ass caught up in some heinous shit, and he hasn’t come home yet.”

Gakuto continues to explain, mentioning the name of the person in question: Keita Minato. Gakuto knows him as a member of the bunch that got cut up last night in the bar, but apparently he’s alive. Whereabouts unknown, but at a period of time after the time of the killings put out by the police, Keita called up a mutual friend of him and Gakuto. The friend then contacted Gakuto, saying Keita was acting strange and incoherent.

“He just kept shoutin’ that he was gonna die and someone be hunting his ass down. After that, nuthin. Don’t even answer his cell now. Guy who took the call says he was mixing his words and shit, sounding really doped up.”

The fact that even a high school kid like Keita could purchase dope without us so much as being surprised was just a fact of the times. Many of the corners and alleys of mazelike Tokyo have quickly turned into open-air drug markets, proof of the increasingly high demand for stimulants and depressants that so many people turn to for the clarity and solace that they felt society could not give them. However, when you're the survivor of a mass murder and you feel that the killer is coming for you next, when you're a person like Keita Minato in other words, your next fix should really be the last thing on your mind.

"I kinda feel like I'm being thrown into the fire without a hose here. Do you really think I can survive talking to these hoppers on my own?"

"I've faith. You always been like a bloodhound, finding people with next to nuthin to go on."

"This Keita kid—does he often do drugs?"

"Far as I know, no. Only them corner boys killed last night were married to them acid blotters. But if what the friend's saying be for real, he might've had a change of heart. Come on man, you still can't search your head for Keita? He's that kid that like to tail around your ass some in high school." "I kinda have a vague idea, yeah..." During high school, there were some juniors who liked to hang around me for some reason, possibly because of me being friends with cool kid Gakuto here. "Well, if he's just having a really bad acid trip, then that'd be good...or at least better than what we're suspecting," I mention with a sigh. "Guess I got no choice if I want to live this month. I'll check it out and see what I can do. Can you tell me about his friends? Contacts, connections, anything?"

Gakuto reaches into his pocket to retrieve a small notebook, as if he was just waiting for me to say it. There're a lot of names, aliases, addresses for hang outs, and phone numbers in that notebook, which means a lot of ground to cover if I want this done quick.

"I'll be in touch if I find out anything. If I manage to find him, I'll try to see him protected as best as I can. That good?" By protection, I mean in the form of my detective cousin Daisuke. He didn't have anything to fear from him. Daisuke's the kind of guy that can let you go for a drug abuse charge if you were witness to a red ball murder, which this one could end up as, what with the

mutilation and multiple homicide. Far as Daisuke was concerned, nabbing the users is small game and a waste of time. Gakuto nods his assent, thanks me, and gives me 20,000 yen to start me off.

Once me and Gakuto go our separate ways, I start to make my way to the crime scene. I'll have to work this one at least vaguely similar to how cousin Daisuke works cases if I would have any chance of finding Keita. I know that I shouldn't really get involved in this, but Gakuto was right. Friends have to look out for each other, after all.

## / 2

The sound of a ringing phone resonates in my empty apartment. I screen the call, as I am wont to do when I'm tired, and sure enough, after five rings it switches to the answering machine with a beep. Cue his voice: familiar, yet still feels alien enough so soon after recovering from the coma.

*"Morning, Shiki. Sorry to call you so early, but I've got a small favor to ask if it isn't too much trouble. Azaka and I promised to meet at a café near Ichigaya station called Ahnenerbe around noon, but something came up and it looks like I won't be able to go. You're free today, right? If you can, drop by there and tell her I'm not coming."* The message ends there.

I roll my body sluggishly over to the bedside and take a look at my clock, a digital green "July 22, 7:23am" on its screen; not even four hours since I came home from my nightly outing. Christ, do I need sleep. I pull the sheets back over my head. The summer heat doesn't really bother me much. I've been able to deal well with the heat and cold ever since my childhood days, and it seems that trait carried over from my...previous life.

Just as sleep was about to take me again, the phone rang a second time. This time, when the answering machine picked up the message, it was a voice I knew, but definitely one you didn't want to hear at just half past seven in the morning.

*"It's me. Watched the news this morning? Probably haven't. That's all right, I didn't either."*

What the hell? It's always been at the back of my mind, but now I can definitely say that I have absolutely no idea what the fuck goes on in Tōko's

head; it is an incomprehension that sometimes continues on to her speech more often than I'm comfortable. It requires at least a few precious seconds of cranial spelunking before you can start to understand what she's saying, a trait which always tends to leave you at a disadvantage when talking to her.

*"Listen up. I'm gonna phrase this in a way even your sleep-deprived brain can process. Three interesting deaths last night. Another jumper that hit pavement, and some girl who killed her boyfriend. I know, I know, same shit, different day, right? But here's something that'll help you out:"* she pauses. *"Our little killer struck again."*

Tōko hangs up abruptly, leaving me to wonder what she thought I would feel when confronted with these facts. Did she expect me to feel a rush of noble intention, and a renewed commitment to this job? How could I, when I still see the world I just awakened back into in a hazy grey veil, when past. Mikiya Kokutō. The last person I saw before the accident two years ago. The only person I trusted two years ago. I have many recollections of being with him, but all of it missing details, as if I was looking at a tampered photograph, something in them not squaring with what I know. And one memory is a gaping hole, completely gone: my last memory of him and the accident. Why was *Shiki* in an accident? Why was Mikiya's face the last thing I saw? It's the reason I still feel awkward talking to Mikiya: I feel like I should know something important about him but it's missing in my head, and without it I won't be able to carry out an actual conversation without them. If only these memories lost to oblivion were stored in an answering machine too. "...tell her I'm not coming." The answering machine stops and falls silent. It's probably just another after effect of the coma, but hearing his voice softens the annoying itch in my mind. Problem is, that's the itch that makes me feel alive. It's the itch that tells me to kill. I am yet to even feel the world of my senses in a manner that seemed coherent and real? Harsh as it may be to admit, but the deaths of these people with no relation to me faze me less than the rays of the sun beating down on me.

After sleeping in for a while more, I get up much later, only when my fatigue finally gives ground. I cook breakfast in the manner that I remember, after which I start to dress. I choose a light orange kimono, which should be cooler if I'm going to walk around town all day. It's then that I get that feeling again, which

causes me to bite my lip: a feeling that someone is watching me do all of this from afar. Even my wardrobe choice is one from a memory that I feel far removed from. I wasn't this way two years ago. The two years of emptiness created a rift, a boundary line between the past and now, as if creating two very different people, yet sharing the same collective memory. It felt as if the weight of that memory, those sixteen years of life before the accident, kept pulling the strings attached to me. I know it's probably just an after effect of the coma, some brain damage from the accident at the worst. I know that no matter how much I spit on this emptiness, this fabricated dollhouse of a lie, in the end, it's still me pulling those damn strings. Hell, maybe it's always been me.

By the time I finish dressing up it's almost eleven o' clock. I press the "Messages" button on my answering machine, repeating the first message. "*Morning, Shiki...*", repeats the voice I have heard many times in the

It's only a short forty minute walk to Ahenenerbe. The café sports their unusual German name on a sign hanging above the entrance, which I spare only a momentary glance at before entering the establishment. Once inside, I immediately notice the dearth of customers, despite it being noon, the hour when college kids frequent cafés to write a novel or do some other boring activity. The café has little lighting. Its sole sources of bright light come from the entrance and four rectangular windows placed on either side of the shop, admitting the sunlight and silhouetting the tables and customers sitting there in a dark, hard-cut outline. The tables further inside the shop aren't so lucky. It paints a nostalgic picture, as if some European middle ages tavern had stepped out of antiquity into the modern age.

I spot a pair of gaudily uniformed girls in a table way in the back, and a quick glance confirms that it is indeed Azaka Kokutō, along with another girl. Strange —Mikiya never mentioned another girl. Oh well, no biggie.

"Azaka," I call out, while walking briskly to their table.

Azaka herself is quite a character on her own. She goes to a fancy girl's boarding school, so she acts the part, complete with a tendency for being ladylike. But you take one look at the way she carries herself and you realize it's all an act. At her best, she has an amazingly competitive streak in her, as well as a boldness that is sorely lacking in many people these days. In contrast to her

brother, who endears himself to people by sheer likeability and charm, Azaka is a figure who commands respect with a single, solid look in her eyes. Those eyes now turned to me as she does a quick about face at my voice calling out her name.

“Shiki...Ryōgi,” she says, each syllable uttered and spat out like an insult. The lingering animosity towards me that she tries so hard to keep in is so palpable I can swear I almost feel the temperature rise. “I have a prior engagement with my brother. I have no business with you.”

“And it seems your brother has a prior engagement of his own,” I say, egging her on. “He said he can’t come. You know, this might just be me, but I think you just got stood up.”

A single restrained gasp. I don’t know if she’s shocked that Mikiya just treated their promise like trash, or the fact that it’s coming from me and I came down here to tell her.

“Shiki, you...you put him up to this, didn’t you?!” Azaka’s hands tremble in barely suppressed anger. I guess it’s the latter, then.

“Don’t be an idiot. He’s done his level best to piss me off too. I mean really, asking me to come all the way here just to send you away?” Azaka glares at me with eyes full of fire. At that moment, her friend, who has until now remained silent, interrupts; and a good thing too, since Azaka looks like she’s about to abandon her carefully cultivated demeanor of placidity by seeing how well she could throw a teacup to my face at point blank range.

“Kokutō, everyone’s staring,” the girl says in a voice as slender as a wire.

Azaka looks around the café for half a beat, and then embarrassed, she sighs. “I’m sorry, Fujino. I don’t know what came over me. I just ruined your day, didn’t I?” she says apologetically. I haven’t really looked at this Fujino clearly up until now. Though she and Azaka look somewhat similar by virtue of the uniform and their school’s grooming standards, their demeanor cannot be more different. While Azaka has a hidden strength behind the prim and proper façade, her companion Fujino looks, at a glance, more fragile, as if she were sick and could collapse at any second.

“Are...you okay? You look kind of—“, I involuntarily say. She answers only

by looking in my direction. The way her eyes pass over me feels as if she's looking at something beyond me, like I was just an insect on the ground to be ignored. My gut tells me she's dangerous, and my mind itches again. My reasoning tells me that there's no way a girl like her could do anything like what happened to the victims in that underground bar, and the itch recedes. "Never mind, pretend I didn't say anything," I conclude.

That crime scene was the handiwork of someone who enjoyed murder, and a girl like this Fujino could be someone like that. Reason says her hands are too weak to twist and tear off their limbs like that anyway. I turn my attention away from her and back to Azaka.

"Well anyway, s'all I got to say. Seeing as I seem to be messenger for a day, is there anything you want to say to your brother?"

"Oh, you'd do that?" says Azaka, who then proceeds to clear her throat. "Then please communicate to Mikiya my desire for him to terminate relations with you. A woman the likes of you has no business being with my brother." Azaka leaves me a final, satisfied look before I go.

I watch as the girl in the orange kimono Azaka called Shiki Ryōgi walks out the front door of the café without incident. Their verbal sparring was tense, and I was sure that if they were armed, they'd have been at each other trying to score a cut across the other's jugular. While it didn't escalate to anything so dramatic, it still stifled me of all but one sentence.

That Shiki certainly had a... *particular* way of speaking. Azaka mentioned her surname as Ryōgi. If she is, as I suspect, a child of the Ryōgi dynasty, then that explains the unusually well-tailored kimono she wore.

“Lovely looking person, wasn’t she?” I ask Azaka.

“Well, I suppose,” she replies truthfully. That’s Azaka for you. She’d argue with a person and cause a public commotion one second, and admit without shame the same person’s better points the next.

“But only as lovely as she was frightening.” I say this firmly, with no sarcasm or humor. “I don’t like her.” It catches both me and Azaka off guard, which is only natural. I rarely, if ever, react sharply to other people, after all. “That’s surprising. I thought you were the kind of person who wouldn’t hate a dog even if it bit you, but I suppose I still have a lot to learn about you, don’t I?”

Curiously, Azaka equated “hate” with “dislike”, which to me are two very different concepts. I didn’t hate Shiki Ryōgi. I only felt that she and I would never get along. My mind returns to the moment she and I locked eyes on each other. My eyes look over her black hair, her white skin, and the black emptiness in her eyes, all somehow ominous, as if looking at a cracked mirror, and seeing

the distortion looking back on you, changed. We both saw what we were trying so desperately to hide behind our backs. She has the blood of many on her, and a predatory countenance. My gut tells me what I've been trying to avoid thinking: she is a killer, a cold-blooded murderer.

But I'm different. I'm better than her. I've never even so much as entertained any thought of murder. I say it to myself, in the dark, forbidden places of my mind, closing my eyes and calling it out repeatedly. Why, then, does she not disappear? It's as if, without even exchanging a single word, Shiki has been indelibly burned into memory.

"And this was supposed to be our day off too. I'm really sorry, Fujino." Azaka renews her plea. I smile my practiced smile. "It's all right. I wasn't really feeling up to it today, anyway."

"Well, you are looking kind of pale, though it's hard to tell what with your skin already being so white."

That wasn't the real reason for my lack of enthusiasm, but I nod my acknowledgement at Azaka all the same. More importantly, I know that my body is continuing a slow slide from bad to worse, but I didn't know that it had reached the point where it showed.

"There's nothing we can do about it today," says Azaka. "I'm just going to ask Mikiya myself, so why don't we head on back for now?"

"Thank you for the concern," I reply. "But wouldn't your brother be at least a little mad at what you just said to Shiki before she left?"

"Oh, it's nothing to worry about. This is probably the thousandth time I said it to him, so if he's gonna get mad at anything, it would just be me acting like a broken record about it. They say belief bends reality, so maybe if I believe it hard enough and repeat it over and over like a really pathetic curse, it'll come true, right?"

I don't know if she's serious or just having fun, but I'm already used to her being largely spontaneous, so I wouldn't at all be surprised if that's something she just made up to make herself feel better. With a consistent record as the top notcher in Reien Girl's Academy, and a similarly consistent placement on the national top ten rankings, it's easy to see how the stress of retaining her place

can get to her.

Reien Girl's Academy provides education anywhere from the first grade to college level, and people usually go in there starting from first grade until they graduate college. People like Azaka and me, who come in after graduating high school, are quite rare. Both of us came from the same school, and we applied at the same time, making her one of my very few close friends in Reien. We usually go out on weekends and holidays to have fun, but today was supposed to have been something else entirely.

Enduring the events and the memories of the past few days has proven to be... difficult, and my depression isn't so easily willed away. In the midst of my difficulty, an old memory of mine came to mind. For some reason, I found myself thinking about an old upperclassman, one who of the few who talked to me when I was a freshman in a local junior high school. The memory comforted me when even the company of other people couldn't, and I cherish it.

When I told Azaka about it, she immediately jumped at the opportunity to try and find this upperclassman immediately. Apparently, her brother knows the neighborhood surprisingly well, and it's easy for him to search for anybody. The truth is, I wasn't too fond of bothering her brother like she suggested, but once Azaka sets out to do something, especially something she just decided in the space of a second, she follows through. Her brother not being able to come today is regrettable but is fortuitous in a way.

When I said I really didn't feel like it earlier, the truth of it was that I already met this fabled upperclassman two days ago. When I met him, I was finally able to say what I couldn't say three years ago. Maybe Azaka's brother not coming was God's way of finally putting a lid on the matter.

"Let's scram. I bet they're thinking of throwing our freeloading butts off their establishment just for drinking a single cup of tea and stealing a table for an hour." Azaka stands up, and even tries her best to hide how disappointed she is at her brother not being able to keep his promise. Azaka might have been acting the lady when she was talking to Shiki, but I'm one of those people she can be herself around, and at her worst times, she can talk like a sailor and lose all sense of formality. It's not that she's pretending to be something she's not, but it's just something she does unconsciously, like a filter she can use to weed out people

who aren't worth her time.

Azaka is a true friend, probably my only one. She shouldn't be involved in what is about to happen, which is why we'll never see each other again.

"Azaka, you can go back to the dormitory without me. I think I'll sleep over at my parents' house tonight."

"You sure? I mean, I'm cool with it, but you're gonna get in trouble with the Directress if this becomes a habit. Don't let it happen too often, okay?" And with a flutter of her cassock, Azaka leaves the gloomily lit café. When Azaka opens the door, my eyes suddenly catch the sign outside. "Ahnenerbe": "ancestral heritage" in German.

I never came to school again after what happened two nights ago. No doubt, the school has already contacted my father about my absence without leave. And when I come home, I will surely be subject to a strict questioning as to what I have been up to in the past two days. And, like a child who has finally acquiesced to the whipping, I will tell everything. My father will then probably disown me, all because I cannot craft a single convincing lie. Except for one lie, the one I told Azaka. That was simple and easy. Not like home. Now I'll never have a home to return to. Home, and each and every part of it, is a lie.

My father now is mother's second husband. The problem stems from the fact that I come from the first. My father only wanted the house, land, and title that my mother's family would bring him, and to him I was just a bonus, an extra, a spare. This consideration of my status led me to try harder, to be a woman of faithfulness and virtue like my mother, to be a model student my father could be proud of, to be a normal girl anyone could trust. I wanted to be that girl so much, not for anyone's sake, but for myself. It was an ambition that drove me and, like a charm, protected me, as much from my father as it did from forcing me to think about a better life.

But the lie is over now. Whatever magic that unreachable dream granted me for protection is now forever lost.

The sun slowly descends to rest, its light now visible only in the gaps between the buildings, and it casts long, parallel shadows in the streets of the darkening city where I continue to walk. The wave of people coming and going, walking

the streets in a great roiling mass, the traffic lights blinking red to green to red again; I walk amongst all of them. Here and there, among both the young and the old, you can see happy faces, picturesque expressions of joy all around, and my heart tightens at the sight. It's all like a dream, another lie.

On a whim, I pinch my cheek, and feel nothing. I pinch harder, twisting skin. Nothing.

When I look at my hands, I see red on my fingertips. Even though I dug my nails deep enough to draw blood, I still feel nothing, no spark of life. I laugh, the exhalation coming out in little fits and starts.

Is it the soul that hurts when I saw the smiles of passersby, or is it, as when people try to hurt me with words, really my brain firing neurons to generate a predisposed reaction from me? A flash of pain to make you understand that bad things are happening and it needs to stop. Whatever the source of the pain, whether rejection, abuse, self-defense, or some other cause, all these are already after the fact, and whatever justification your brain creates for the pain is just like any other drug, a function to make you feel better, to sober your soul about what was done, and what has been done to you.

Though I do not know the common pain, I understand the wounds of the soul, and the pain that comes with it. But that particular breed of pain is hardly important, nothing more than a fleeting delusion you entertain, because the pain of the soul is easily dispelled with the right words from the right person speaking them, massaging them into a lie, and you forget the pain because it was so trivial. Real pain is not so easily remedied, because as long as the wound remains, the pain continues its course, throbbing, pulsating, and proving if nothing else, that you are alive.

If the soul were real, if my soul could be touched, then maybe the wounds on it can be real too, and pain, real pain, would follow. Like on that night, when those boys violated me. I still remember: their low voices of laughter, the shadows on their faces flickering in the light of the alcohol lamp.

Threats—

Shouting—

Accusations—

Being violated—

I remember the man lying on top of me, clutching something in his hand raised above his head. It caught the light, and for an instant I saw the glint of steel. I remember it falling fast, swung downward. Afterwards, I felt a warm sensation in my stomach, and when my eyes looked downwards, I see my uniform torn in the abdomen and wet with blood. After that, a haze of violence and carnage, dealt not by them, but by me, my own doing. I end their little lives and realize that the warmth in my stomach was what they truly called pain.

My heart tightens again. An ethereal voice spoke in my ear, but it sounds as if it's coming from my own head. It tells me that there is no mercy, no forgiveness, and it repeats over and over. My legs buckle, and the warmth in my belly, now more like a scalding fire, comes again; an unseen hand clutching my insides in an ever tightening grip.

The nausea is overwhelming, more so than usual. I should be slipping into unconsciousness by now. An arm goes numb, almost as if it was suddenly taken away, and only by looking at it do I know it's still firmly attached to my shoulder.

It hurts...so much.

Now, I know I am alive.

The stab wound that I know has been healed now suddenly burns again. In a childhood long gone, my mother once told me that the pain would go away once the wound heals. But now even that is a lie. Even after the bleeding stops and the skin sews itself back on, the pain remains.

But mother, I don't know if you understand, but I like this burning sensation. There is no greater object that makes me realize I am indeed alive! This is the lingering pain that I can be sure is no fleeting delusion.

"I need to find him...quickly," I whisper to myself, the words coming out in rapid, ragged bursts. The score must be settled, and the life of the boy who escaped must be taken. It is the last thing I want to do, but there is no other choice, if I don't want to be hunted down myself as a murderer. And now that I

finally have the pain I craved for so long, it would be a shame to end it like that.  
No, I'll have more of this, this pleasure of finally feeling alive.

My body moans and screams with an ache when I move it, but nevertheless I manage to start dragging myself to those corner boys' usual haunts. Tears start to form and fall from my eyes from the sharp pain, but right now, even the pain is almost like a beloved companion.

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I go back to my apartment after my little parley with Azaka, trying to catch up on my sleep. Only at night do I go out again. So far the job Tōko hired me for is still in its early stages, and yet only two days after it adds a fresh corpse to its tally, making it a total of five bodies so far: four in the underground bar that started this whole mess, and the one that Tōko said showed up last night, apparently at some random construction site in the same neighborhood. I don't really see it being related to the four originals. But then, Mikiya did say to me once that these people tended to know each other at least on a cursory basis if they're in the same neighborhood. They're hoppers, alley kids, and drifters that are slinging, buying, and playing the same game night after night, after all, he said. If so, last night's fatality may have known the bodies in the bar, at least by name or reputation.

My attention drifts back to the girl Azaka was with at Ahnenerbe. I'm still mostly groping in the dark with the brand-new capabilities of my Eyes, so I ended up accidentally seeing her lines—the traces of death that ran over all things—when I looked straight at her. That was careless, even for me. She looked normal enough, very much like your average stuck up rich kid. But she was hiding blood in her past; of that much I'm sure. Her eyes told her story well enough: hers was a liminal existence, tied by one fragile string to one side of her life, and being pulled like a metal to a magnet to the other, as if she belongs there. I mean, fuck, of all people, I should know the feeling.

We read each other like two predators back there, and my gut tells me she's the one, but I can't entirely be sure. I don't see, or at least I don't yet see, a reason

for her being someone who enjoys murder as much as I do. But then, since when did killers in this town start needing a reason to enjoy killing?

Hah, “enjoy killing.” I wonder what Mikiya would think if he heard me saying that. He’d probably give me a stern telling-to, saying “murderin’ be a purty steep crime, Shiki” while waving a finger in front of me.

*What an utter idiot*, I muse, as much to myself as to Mikiya who must be half-way across town right now.

Mikiya once said to me that I haven’t changed from before. I wonder, then, if I was always like this even before the accident: walking around town aimlessly, a woman a little off her rocker searching for something to kill.

I try to tell myself that no, *Shiki* never had any liking for this sort of stuff, or if she had, it certainly wasn’t in her laundry list of priorities. This was always **Shiki’s** line of thinking. **Shiki**, the man—yin, dwelling inside *Shiki*, the woman—yang. But then, where does that put me? *Shiki* was here before, but he’s gone now. Dead, probably, or something like it. Then that means this desire to kill isn’t anything else but my own, and I can’t let some other personality take the fall for it. Tōko had the right of it I suppose. This case does fit me like a glove. I mean, holy shit, I get to kill someone with no strings attached!

It’s almost midnight. I ride the subway to a station I rarely get off at. The city is sleepless tonight, the noise rising to the all too common chorus of the streets: the melody of traffic and speeding cars; and then the background vocals: the shouting and arguments echoing in the streets; and now the percussions: the sound of bats and pipes and knives, setting the tempo by claiming their share of screaming victims; and then the main vocals: the siren wail of the police rollers; and always, the footsteps are there, in some places a scattered rhythm, in some a low rumble, all of them here in this labyrinthine city.

Here, from the exit of the station, I can see the tall cargo cranes and stacks of shipping containers, themselves as tall as a house or larger, that reveal the short distance to the port.

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I don't know where the last one ran off to, but I've thought of a way to solve that problem. I was taken to a lot of places by those men. They had hangouts scattered all over the neighborhood, places where they could unwind before they did me. I might find out where the last one is hiding by going back to these places and asking the people he knows there. They must know. He can't rely on his parents, or his school, or the police, so he has no other recourse but his own kind.

Walking the city at night is something I've never gotten used to, and a little part of me keeps saying that I should just go home and not bother with going to these shady night dens, but the pain and the filthy memories propel my feet step by step.

At a large karaoke bar, the third place I visited tonight, I finally manage to meet a person who claims to be a friend of Keita Minato. An employee of the establishment, he lets slip a dirty smile when we talk, and suggests that we go to a quiet place to talk. Ditching his shift, we walk again. The little voice tells me that this is another trap, another game we play before he jumps me like the others. He knows how weak I am. He can smell it, and the smile he made while we were talking was him reading me as easy prey. He must know what Keita Minato and his friends did to me, and he thinks he can do it too. That's why he hasn't a worry on his mind right now. Even knowing all this, I ignore the voice and follow him. He's my only chance at finding my lost one, and I'm not going to pass it up.

We arrive at a lonely stretch of road. I grip my burning stomach even tighter,

and prepare myself.

It's almost midnight. For the hundredth time tonight, I summon the memory of me being violated, and my conviction is renewed, my steps unyielding. The city whispers again tonight, the noise coming together in its regular volume: the shudders in the air from the breaths of the pained, the sighing release of the dying, and the whispers of the dead. This is a place that bleeds, suffers, and dies every night, and for a moment I come to an understanding with this labyrinthine city.

Here in this barely lit strip of road with this wretched man, I can see the warehouses and silos, black silhouettes towering in the sky, that reveal the short distance to the port.

Luck's on his side tonight, thinks the young man. Keita and his buddies were a talkative bunch, always consummate loudmouths talking about the rich girl they kept banging over and over again every week. For his part, the young man had long since resigned the matter to the back part of his brain where he could filter out all their voices as just meaningless background noise, just part of their routine. What they did in their spare time was their business, not his, always had been. Keita and his group weren't anyone special, and every one had grown up in a different corner of the hood anyway, so it wasn't his job to butt in, and anyway the story had sounded suspiciously embellished right from the start so he tended to take it with a grain of salt in the first place. But then, the girl coming to his job on his shift was just too irresistible a treat.

Oh sure, he knew she was the girl they were talking about. She fit the bill exactly: rich girl from a rich kid school. Now, on a regular occasion, he'd be on a payphone right now telling his crew about the find, to share the fun. But as good a friend as he was, this was not an opportunity that necessitated a lot of people. This was not, in other words, the kind of easy alley gang bang he and four other boys would occasionally engage in. It's a whole different ball game this time, seeing as he recognizes the girl as family to the owners of Asagami Construction, the daughter if he remembered correctly. They're the kind of upper crust clan who put a premium value on appearances and the gossip about them in the local patrician society. Raping this girl and threatening to divulge the dirty details to the public later, maybe even with some carefully selected photos, was

as good as him dipping his hands into the family wallet himself; for this is a family that would sooner settle the matter with money than drag the whole scandal through the publicity of a trial. That's why he didn't call his friends tonight. To him, this was a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth.

This is a solid caper, thinks the young man; a caper Keita and those dumb fuckers never thought of. Despite being the leader of a semi-famous crew in the neighborhood, the man Keita and the others followed were so dumb they probably couldn't figure out which way to point a gun if they shot themselves looking down the barrel.

Fujino Asagami keeps pace with the man without a single word. It almost makes him a little nervous. Bad idea to bring her to the usual places, he thinks, so he heads to the warehouse section of the harbor. There's little light, and at this midnight hour, the longshoremen would be home and there'd be no one guarding the place. When they enter the dark spaces between the tall warehouses, he finally turns to face the girl. The sound of the waves and the faint traces of light coming from the Broad Bridge construction site nearby compound to the uneasiness of Fujino's silence, but the man shrugs it away.

"This should be far enough," he mutters. "So, what did you wanna ask about?" He figures he might as well answer Fujino's question. Not letting her voice her question, after all, would be in bad form.

"Er, yes. Would you happen to know where Mr. Keita is now?" she finally says after a full five-second delay. Through all of this Fujino hadn't been making eye contact with the man. Her eyes, half-obscured by her well-kept bangs, were downcast and seemed to alternate in interest between the one hand she had on her stomach and the floor.

"Nah, girl, Keita ain't been seen 'round here last few days. I heard he ain't even got a place of his own, so he bounce around, crashing in a different crib every week with his peoples. Far as I know, he ain't got a cell either, so you can't connect with him."

"No...I can contact him."

She's talking weird. She doesn't know where Keita is even though she can contact him? Did those guys fuck her so much her brain shut off or something?

That should make things a lot smoother for business later, but he had to admit he'd been expecting a little resistance. He likes his girls with fight in them.

"Oh, well, cool then," he responds. "Then why dontcha just ring him up and ask then?"

"That is...well...it seems Mr. Keita doesn't want to tell me where he's hiding. That's why I'm looking all over and asking his friends. Please, I'd only like an answer. It's perfectly fine if you don't know."

"Wait, hold the fuck up. Whatchoo mean he's hiding? He gone and got hisself into some deep shit, ain't he?"

She was beginning to irritate him. Having not seen the news himself, he considers for a moment the possibility that Keita raping Fujino had leaked out somehow, a thought easily dismissed when he realizes that, were that the case, it wouldn't be Fujino herself coming for Keita, but the cops with a wagon and a waiting interview room downtown.

"Oh, I see what this about now, girl. Now that Keita's gone and dumped you, you come hollering for another man, am I right?" The smile which never left his face now turns into amused laughter. If he was really lucky tonight and Fujino became his woman, he might not even need threats to get the money. She's no slouch in the looks either. Money and a woman: what else could he call this but the Almighty himself putting some polish in his life?

"We probably shoulda rolled over to my place. Or are you fine doing it here?"

The girl in the black uniform nods. "I'd like an answer before that," she says.

"Bitch, shut yo mouth with that excuse. I mean, like I know where he crashing at before he shoot up. I dunno, and I ain't got a yearning to know."

Fujino looks up, a content look on her face. Her eyes hold no warmth now, save for a faint light in her pupils that was not there before, a light that shines like a spiral. All normality seems to have left it. For his part, the man is less focused on her eyes and more on the odd situation that is taking place on one of his arms, which has started to move by itself. His elbow starts to turn, the flesh there contorting, slightly at first but then more severe, in the manner of something being twisted. A small creaking sound of the bone accompanies the

elbow twisting past the ninety degree mark, but it doesn't stop there. Within another moment, it finally breaks with a single popping noise.

The young man manages a short, piercing shriek, his voice slipping out like gas from a balloon at first, but then growing into a scream when his arm breaks. Earlier he had kept praising his luck, but he's one of those who can't distinguish between the good and the bad kind, and whatever amount of good luck he had tonight has definitely run out.

In this narrow alleyway between two warehouses untouched by moonlight, the first stirrings of tragedy begin to unfold.

Since the first twist, the man's scream has gone from recognizably human to something resembling the baying of some beast. His arms don't even look like arms anymore. They're more like wire puzzles, or one of those rubber bands twisted around to make paper airplanes fly. At any rate, they're not going to go back to anything resembling functioning arms any time soon.

"H-h-help!" he shouts in vain. He tries to run away from the girl, who only stands still before him, but finds his efforts to do so are hampered by his right leg suddenly being torn to a bloody pulp from the knee, and his body stumbling into air and slamming into pavement. Blood scatters with a sickening splat, as if someone emptied a bucket full of it on the concrete walls, the spatter looking like some obscene piece from a modern art museum. Fujino Asagami, with eyes lighted by some flickering flame of spiral behind them, watches the entire scene unfold.

"A...screw, she's sc—, she's screwing me, haha!" His words are almost unintelligible. Somehow, amidst the blinding pain, he finds the will to laugh at his own private joke. Fujino decides to ignore him and continue.

"Bend," she whispers softly, like a curse, the same curse she's been using since she started this. Her friend once told her that belief bends reality, that repeating something over and over like a curse might cause it to come true.

The man is squirming on the ground, with both arms twisted and with one less leg, moving his head from side to side. The blood flowing from the open leg has formed a red carpet on the ground, welcoming Fujino. She steps into the carpet, her shoes dipping into it slightly. The sweet fragrance of the blood around her

resembled the hot, humid, and sticky air of the summer so much. She emits a sigh as she looks down at the writhing mass of flesh before her. That she has to do this is regrettable, detestable even, but necessary, something she had intended to do right from the start. Fujino knew from the way he was hitting on her that he was yet to be enlightened by what happened at that underground bar. But it was only a matter of time before he did, and when that happened, he would also remember Fujino asking about Keita Minato. It wouldn't take long before he put two and two together, and start to suspect Fujino, maybe even report her to the police. So this is something she truly has to do. And that besides, the man had been asking for it. Though it was indirect, this is nothing less than her revenge against the ones that violated her. Luckily, her ability to violate them turns out to be much more potent.

“Forgive me—but I have no choice.” The young man’s remaining left leg is ripped to shreds in a manner similar to its counterpart. The man, who had been hanging onto a small thread of life earlier, expires with a final convulsion that continues even after his death. Before, Fujino would look at a body like this and she wouldn’t feel a shred of empathy. But now, having finally known pain, she understands, and she sympathizes, and she is glad. She knows now that to live is to feel pain.

“Only through this can I finally be normal.”

She was the one who made the man this way. She was the one who hurt him. She is better than him, than all of them. This is what it means to live, Fujino thinks; to be able to celebrate true happiness only in the midst of such cruelty and suffering by becoming cruel as well.

“Mother, am I no longer human for going this far?”

The burning in Fujino’s stomach has become almost unbearable as her heart pumps blood faster and faster, the beating the only thing she hears. Despite the summer heat, a shiver worms its way up her spine.

“I never wanted to murder people—“

“Oh, I beg to differ.”

Fujino turns towards the sudden intruder. Silhouetted against the moonlight reflected off the harbor waters, a single kimono-clad figure stands in the entrance

of the narrow alley: Shiki Ryōgi.

“Miss...Shiki?”

“Fujino Asagami, huh? It’s all in the name. I should have known you were related to the Asakami dynasty.” Lightly, Shiki starts to walk towards the alley interior. With narrowing eyes, she observes the scene of carnage around her.

“When did you—“, Fujino starts to ask, but she already knows the answer.

“Ever since you lured that lump of meat out here, I was watching the whole time,” Shiki says coldly. That means she saw everything. She saw it but didn’t try to stop it. Even knowing what would happen, she revealed herself, ensuring that only one question races through Fujino’s mind: why? “He is not a lump of meat!” says Fujino angrily, thinking Shiki’s casual callousness going too far, even despite her own thoughts earlier. “He is— was—a human being.”

“You sure? ‘Cause, at least to my understanding, he doesn’t look too much like one right now. Fact is, you butchered him, and he didn’t die like a human at all.” Shiki continues to advance, her pace quickening with each step, boots clicking with each advance. “He probably was human before, but humans don’t end their life that way. It’s a death removed from all boundaries of common sense, and it deprives him of all meaning. You deprived him of all meaning. You chopped him up good and proper just like a, well...like a lump of meat. Good entertainment, though.”

The declaration makes Fujino truly disgusted at Shiki, a more potent loathing than before. She says that both Fujino and the corpse are not normal, an aberration, when if anything she herself is abnormal, considering the way she observes the scene with an eyebrow cocked, as if this was the grandest excursion of her life.

“No!” Fujino declares loudly. “I’m normal, unlike you!”

Shiki only responds with curious laughter. “Trust me, Fujino, we’re more alike than you know. We’re birds of a feather.”

“And I don’t believe you.” Fujino’s eyes now fixate on Shiki, and soon enough the power she had when she was just a child starts to manifest. Her vision of Shiki becomes strangely distorted and warped—she need only will it now to

make it real. But as suddenly as it comes, it fades away and dies. Both of them are surprised: Fujino at her ability losing focus, and Shiki at Fujino's sudden change.

"Again?! What the fuck is up with you tonight?" Shiki asks, voice rising.

She scratches her head at the wasted opportunity. "I could've killed you right before now. Hell, I could've done it in the café. What a waste. You're useless to me right now." After saying thus, Shiki turns on her heels and walks away, the sound of her boots starting to echo as she goes farther.

"Listen, if I were you, I'd cut my losses and go home," Shiki calls back to Fujino. "That way we won't have to see each other again." After a few moments, her silhouette too, disappears behind a building, leaving Fujino still standing dumbstruck at the red carpet of blood. She was back to the way she was before. Without pain. She looks down at the corpse again, and finds that she can no longer feel what she had felt earlier. The wellspring of pain she had felt was again gone, leaving only the memory of the crime, and the words of Shiki Ryōgi, echoing like an accusation. We're birds of a feather.

"No. I'm different...from you," she murmurs repeatedly, like another curse. How she wished it was true. She hates what she is doing, and she trembles at the possibility of having to repeat the process just to find Keita Minato, for she truly feels, in her conflicted mind, that murder is the most unforgivable of sins.

On Fujino's blood tinted reflection on the pavement, a little smile plays across her face.

## **Lingering Pain - IV**

As the first rays of sunlight mark the early morning of July 23rd, I finally learn the whereabouts of Keita Minato. It definitely took some doing: a whole day of asking his friends and acquaintances, and from there, his contacts, and then determining his usual turf and narrowing it down to the hard-to-find nooks where he could hide. A whole day of good, straightforward street work, in other words, to determine that he had apparently made a long vacant room in a run-down six floor apartment tower in the uptown projects his new home away from home. Right now, I stand outside the front door of this room. A doorbell is affixed beside the door, and I am surprised to find that it still works when I press it.

“Keita Minato,” I call out with a voice loud enough to carry inside. “I’ve been looking for you for a mutual friend. Hope you don’t mind me coming in.”

After a few seconds of waiting with no reply, I try the door, which turns out to be unlocked. I walk inside, careful not to make any startling noises. I pass a short and narrow corridor before coming to a wider space which I can only assume was designed to be the living room, but judging by its lack of any object related to a living room, or indeed any object at all, casts some doubts on my assumption. No light is turned on, and only little cracks in the closed windows illuminate the wooden floor with thin streaks of sunlight. The floor creaks with each step, despite my efforts to prevent it. I can see two other rooms from where I am, probably a kitchen and a bedroom, though from what I can see, the kitchen is in a similar state as the living room, empty and barely lit by sunlight. The bedroom door is closed, however, which makes it the first place I search.

I open the door to the bedroom and enter to find it in absolute darkness, the

storm shutters on the windows sealing them tight and preventing any light from coming in. At the opening of the door I hear a tiny gasp of breath from within. Only the bare token of light from the living room allows me to see what's inside: an empty room, like a box, all furniture replaced by convenience store food plastic where cockroaches have taken residence, a single cellphone on the floor, and a young man, the one who gasped earlier, who looks to be about sixteen years of age.

"Keita Minato, I presume. I have to say, staying cooped up here'll kill you, not to mention the charge you're gonna get for squatting."

He scrabbles on his hands and feet backwards to the wall opposite the door. While it's only been three days since the incident, his face is already thin, almost emaciated, with hollowed-out cheeks and bloodshot eyes. It's obvious he hasn't had a single hour of sleep between now and three days ago. I know Gakuto's friend said that he was taking drugs, but you don't need drugs to turn out like this. The recipe is all in the facts: a bloody tragedy he wants to forget, and a need to hide. So he locks himself up in this room, shuts the windows tight, waits in the darkness, and hopes for the best...and slowly goes insane from the post-traumatic stress while doing so. It's a move of desperation, but it's worked for him for three days so far.

"Who's there?" he says with a quivering voice. I only take two steps inside before I stop, careful not to provoke him into rash action. In his current state, he's liable not to trust anyone, so I decide to try just talking to him for now to calm him down. "I said who's there?" he repeats, this time with more aggression. I raise my hands to indicate I'm not a threat.

"Relax, I'm a friend of Gakuto. We were schoolmates back in high school, too. Remember anyone named Mikiya Kokutō?"

"Kokutō...Mikiya Kokutō? That you?" I must be the last person on his mind he ever expected to find him here. It takes a few seconds for him to recover from the shock, but when he does, he starts to cry. "Wh—why did you come here?"

"A favor for the big guy. He asked me to go and find you, you know? We're both worried you've gotten yourself dragged into something way out of your league." I risk another step forward, but it only makes him shake his head

violently.

“No, nonono. I can’t go out. Not now. I’ll die.”

“You’ll die if you keep staying here too.” Keita’s eyes widen and start to look at me with slight animosity. I produce a cigarette from my pocket, light, then smoke it. I’m not a smoker, but it’s a gesture that often makes you look composed and makes other people relaxed, obviously something I need right now. “I know what happened,” I say while exhaling a puff of smoke. “Keita, you know who did it, don’t you?”

He keeps his silence. “Then you won’t mind if I just talk to you for a while, right?” I say. “On the 20th, you and your friends were at the Mirage Bar at night, when it was raining. There’s lots of stories about what you’ve all been up to, but I think I can put together the gist of it. Don’t worry, the police don’t know yet. Rule of the street is that everyone lies to a cop, after all.” Despite me saying this, Keita now displays a different type of fear from before, the fear common to all who committed a crime that’ll land them on a life sentence or a death penalty if they were found out. “Guess what? Someone saw you go into that bar that night, and he told me that there weren’t just five of you. You had a girl with you, a high school student. I don’t know her name yet, but it’s only a matter of time. Now unless she can pull herself up from being stone dead, her corpse wasn’t present in that bar when the detectives got there. And that girl hasn’t told the cops, and hasn’t been seen since that night. Now is there anything you might want to tell me about her?”

“I ain’t...I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Fine, then. You did it. Expect a wagon in ten minutes.”

“Wait—no! I didn’t do it! There’s no way I could have!”

“Yeah, I thought so. So the girl really was there, wasn’t she?” Keita nods after a few moments. “But then we have a different problem. We’re looking at something that a girl couldn’t have done alone. You sure you weren’t drugged?”

“No. We ain’t stoned at the time.”

“Keita, I don’t need to tell you it’s impossible for a girl to dismember the bodies of four guys.”

“But that’s what went down!” he shouts indignantly. “I ain’t lying. I been thinking she was weird from the start, but man, she was crazy! She was like a monster!” His teeth chatter as he covers his face with his hands and recalls what happened. “She just stood there, calm like, while everyone was being twisted and torn apart. I heard their bones snapping and breaking, while I was there scared shitless. When two of my friends bought it, I came to my senses and booked it the hell out of there. That Fujino Asagami bitch ain’t normal. If I’d stayed there, she’d have killed me too!”

His voice says it all. It’s all too obvious with these sorts of people: a classic case of sudden role reversal between the predator and prey. There’s no better way for you to feel the difference between the killer and the victim than to become the other one, and Keita certainly felt that difference keenly that night. As for his story, well, it’s certainly one of the stranger ones out there: a person who can twist and bend things just by looking at them. Just a few months ago I would have discounted this story as an insane rant at worst and an outright lie at best, but since becoming acquainted to Shiki and her newfound Eyes, as well as Miss Tōko the mage, I don’t know what I can deny as fictional anymore. Putting that aside for now, there’s still one thing that bothers me.

“All right, I believe this story of yours about this Fujino being the killer,” I say. Unsurprisingly, Keita is shocked.

“You...you do?” Keita stutters. “But anyone would say that’s a fucking lie! Please, say it’s a lie and tell me I just snapped and people like her don’t exist!”

“Sorry, but...well, let’s just say I get to know the strangest people. Don’t try and think too hard on it. But what did you mean when you said Fujino was weird from the start?” Keita slowly seemed to be slipping into a more stable state of mind. His shoulders aren’t so tense anymore.

“Ah, yeah...yeah, she was weird because...it was like she was lagging behind, you know? Like she was actin’ in a play and her reactions was always late. Even when the Boss was threatening her, her mug ain’t change one bit. We shoot her up with some of the good stuff, and it’s the same story. Even when we beat the bitch up she look like she ain’t feeling it.”

When I was looking for Keita, a lot of the people I asked told me about the girl

and how Keita's group had been treating her, but now when he comes out with a confession, it leaves me stunned at how brutally they treated her, not to mention how casual Keita is about it. What this Fujino girl did is simply her long-awaited revenge against those who had been raping her for half a year. Had these men been caught and arrested, it is likely they would be convicted, but with some of them minors, and others close to that age, it's also highly likely a competent lawyer can cut their sentences down to something more manageable than life without parole. Minors like Keita can't even get a sentence without parole. And in a decade or two they're back on the streets. Most police, even the relatively considerate ones, would protest such an outcome. Some would say they deserve the noose. And this Fujino girl, judging from the ferocity of her murder, would definitely feel that that sentence would be the farthest thing from justice. But what's right in your gut and what's right to the law are both bedfellows who sleep with daggers beside them: occasional allies, but more often enemies. That's why there is little to be done about it.

"The girl looked mighty fine," Keita continues, "but doing her wasn't any fun. It was like fucking a doll. But—yeah, there was a time when that changed. This happened real recent. One of my friends is this crazy asshole who got his kicks by beating the shit out of the bitch over and over and seeing her not react. He change it up that day; brought a metal bat with him. He whacked her upside the back, and her face was like, all twisted up 'cause of the pain. I was actually kinda relieved, you know? Because then I knew that you could actually hurt her. I remember that night 'cause that was the one night where she act like a human... to everything we did."

"Alright, that's enough. Shut the hell up." Holy shit. It was getting harder and harder to just listen to this guy without doing something to him. "I get what you're trying to say, so enough, alright? My cousin's a city cop who can protect you. Right now, the lockup is probably the second safest place for you. Don't worry, I won't tell him anything about what you did." I approach him and urge him to stand up, but it only makes him retreat towards the wall behind him even further, his earlier uneasiness returning.

"No! I ain't going to no cops and I ain't going to no court. Even then, she'll kill me if I go out. If I'm just gonna end up in some cop's body bag in pieces, I'll

take my chances here!"

"She'll kill you?" That's a bit weird. If he goes out, Fujino will have to find him first. It's a bit too early to say he's going to get killed, unless...he was being watched. It's only at that moment that the cellphone on the floor beside Keita draws my attention.

"Fujino Asagami is calling you, isn't she?" He flinches again at the sound of the name, a sign of his quickly returning panic. "Does she know about you being here?"

"I don't know," he answers with a queasy voice. "I had the Boss' phone when I ran. She called me after a while, telling me that she got everyone, that I was next, that she'd find me. That's why I need to hide!"

"Why haven't you dumped that phone in the nearest gutter?" I ask, though I think I already know the answer.

"Cause she said she was gonna kill me if I threw it away! She said if I didn't wanna die, then I should keep it, 'cause she was gonna let me go as long as I had it!" Uh oh, he's becoming more and more hysterical. "She calls me every night, the crazy little bitch! She said she met Akino two days ago, and then Kōhei yesterday. She said she killed them in exchange for me. She said 'isn't this good for you?' like she was singing it. Said if I value my friends' lives, then I should come out and see her, but why the fuck would I do that, right?"

He starts giggling like a madman. I can't imagine what it must have been like for him, getting calls every night, the topic always about how another friend died because of him. I can almost hear her voice through the phone.

*I couldn't find you today, so I killed another of your friends in your place. Come out if you don't want any more of your friends to die.*

*It's fine if you don't, but I'll keep killing, and sooner or later, I'll find you.*

"What should I do, Mikiya? I don't wanna die, not like the others. They were screaming and screaming while blood was leaking out of their necks and spilling outta their mouths like a towel being wrung!"

"You need to start by throwing away the phone. She's doing this to gloat. If she can't get to your head, then her killing anyone is meaningless." "Ain't I

getting through to your head? I can't! Keeping this phone is my last chance at living!"

"She killed two people exactly because she knows you're still keeping it. And besides, you'll end up dead either way if you stay like this, locked up in this empty room." I approached Keita, who at this point had wrapped his arms around his legs in a fetal position, and pull him up by the arm. I discard my cigarette, smothering it with my shoe.

"Mikiya, please stop. The end is coming for me, and it probably be best if you left me alone." Then, as soon as he declares this with finality, he recants just as quick and offers a new plea. "Oh nonono, I don't wanna be alone anymore. Please, you gotta help me!" The phone calls must have really gotten to his head if he's alternating between two polar thoughts like this.

"Don't worry, I will. I'm not giving you over to the police. I'm gonna take you to the safest place in the city that I know, trust me." No one else can shelter Keita except Miss Tōko right now. I'll have to put my trust in her as well. With that, I drag Keita out of the apartment and we head as fast as we can to Miss Tōko's end of town.

## **Lingering Pain - V**

I arrive at Miss Tōko's office to find Shiki there as well. Me bringing an outsider into Miss Tōko's office quickly sends her into a panic, but I explain the situation as fast as I can, and she begrudgingly accepts Keita Minato's plea for shelter. She takes him to her bedroom to let him sleep on a sofa, and returns quickly to the office room where me and Shiki waited, me sitting in the office room couch and Shiki leaning with her back to a wall. Both of us say nothing until Miss Tōko is seated on her own chair. Then, almost as if they had planned to beforehand, they say in unison:

“You big softy.”

“Yeah, I knew something like that was coming my way,” I reply.

“If you knew, then you should have had some second thoughts about getting involved. You are such an easy mark for these people.”

“Well, what did you expect me to do, ma’am, leave someone to die? You know the circumstances.”

Miss Tōko only responds with a curt wave of dismissal. She might be a bit annoyed, but I know her well enough to say that she's not the kind of person who callously throws away an opportunity to help a person in real need. Keita would surely be safe here, under Miss Tōko's many means of protection, and if I had to suffer her mild disappointment, then so be it. Shiki is a different story, however. She'd objected vehemently earlier when I brought Keita in, saying that this would only complicate matters, but Miss Tōko had overruled her. I can practically feel the angry eyefuck she's throwing my way.

“Well, this is a special case, considering the circumstances,” Miss Tōko says. “What do you plan on doing now? Don’t tell me you’re going out to find Fujino Asagami and try to persuade her.”

“Realistically speaking, we can’t hide Keita Minato forever,” I reply. “Fujino Asagami won’t stop the murders until he finds her, and that’s unacceptable. I think the best course of action now would be to meet with her and talk things over.”

At this, Shiki finally talks. “You know the reason we say you’re an easy mark? This is pretty much it. You’re living in fantasy land if you think that’s going to work.” While Shiki has never been one to massage her words when she felt the need to talk, she was being especially antagonistic today. She really must be angry at me. “You’re not gonna get through to her head, I’m telling you,” she continues. “That girl’s too far gone. She won’t stop even if she does get to Keita. He’s just an excuse to keep killing at this point, and when she’s done with him, she’ll find another excuse just as convenient.” “Yeah, right, as if you know her.”

“Oh, but I do, and met her to boot. Azaka brought her along to Ahnenerbe yesterday.”

That catches me by surprise. How would Azaka know Fujino? The people I talked to placed her around or above high school age, so it’s possible she could be studying at Reien Girl’s Academy. Wait a minute—

“It’s a bit of a surprise that you’re behind on this one, Kokutō,” Miss Tōko declares. “You still haven’t made any inquiries about Fujino Asagami?”

“I hope you’ll excuse me for not looking into a person I just heard of not two hours ago, ma’am. I can’t very well drag a person with me around town while a known killer is looking for him.” Something bothers me, and not just because Azaka keeps terrible company and could have been involved, but something else, like when you keep remembering something you want so hard to put out of your mind. “So does this mean that she’s still going to school?” I ask. “Why don’t we just ask the school?”

“No, that’s a dead end. She started cutting classes and not going home since the night of the incident. She’s a wanderer now. I called Azaka up and she says she hasn’t seen her since the day they met.”

“Wait. When did you check that out, Miss Tōko?”

“A little while ago. When Shiki told me last night that Fujino was with Azaka, I called her right away, but it seems she didn’t notice anything was out of place with her friend.”

The mention of Azaka and Fujino in the café again makes me think in hindsight. Maybe if I had promised to meet Azaka a day later, or if I’d found Keita a day earlier, a meaningless murder might have been avoided. “That said, Keita Minato’s presence here isn’t totally useless to us,” says Miss Tōko. “We can just use him as bait to lure her out. It might turn violent after that, so I’d advise you to stay here with Keita.”

“Wait, what’s going on? Why are you so interested in Fujino Asagami anyway? And what do you mean ‘violent’? What are the both of you planning?”

Miss Tōko exhales a sharp sigh and replies. “We might have to fight her, if the circumstances dictate it. The truth, Kokutō, is that we have a new job, and the client wants Fujino killed, silently and with no mess. And so our job is to kill her before it all becomes public.”

Wait, hold on a second! It’s not like she’s killing indiscriminately! She can still be reasoned with,” I reply abruptly. Now I finally understand why Miss Tōko took Shiki under her employ. She has use for her talents, and this is it. “There’s one thing you don’t know yet, Kokutō, something that makes that a difficult course of action. Right before I put Keita Minato to sleep, I made him tell me the whole story. The ringleader of their little crew apparently brought a knife that fateful night, and she stabbed Fujino with it deep. Keita said that was the exact moment she made with the twisting. That’s when her revenge started.”

“But I don’t see how that could be reason that she’s beyond negotiating with.”

“The problem stems from that point, however. Fujino was stabbed on the stomach the night of the 20th.”

“Stabbed in the stomach...” I mutter out of hearing of both Shiki and Miss Tōko. Now I connect the dots. The night of the 20th, a student of Reien Girl’s Academy, and a stab wound in the stomach. I try my damndest to reach a different conclusion, but it’s useless. That’s where it all points to.

“According to Keita, she keeps calling him, saying that the pain from the wound is what drives her forward. Any wound that produces that much pain is bound to be obvious. You’d look paler from blood loss, your gait would change from trying to accommodate the pain, things of that nature. But when both Azaka and Shiki met her only two days from the night when she was supposedly stabbed, none of them observed anything out of the ordinary about her. I don’t know how but it seems like she’s made a full recovery. Here’s my theory: every time she remembers being raped, the pain from her stab wound returns. It’s just a phantom pain, the wound being long gone, but to her it’s every bit as real and painful as that night. And every time she feels the pain, she kills another. Who’s to say that won’t happen if you happen to be talking to her?”

But at the same time, doesn’t that mean that if we can get rid of her phantom pain, then we can talk to her? Before I can say this, however, Shiki offers her own observations.

“You’re wrong, Tōko. Her pain is real, and it’s still in her body.”

“But how could that be? Are you retracting what you said about her being unwounded?”

“Not really. Her stab wound’s completely healed, that much we can be sure of. But, fact remains that she’s still in pain. Now I’m not saying she’s got a rusty metal rebar stuck in her intestines or anything like that. It’s just that, to my observation, her pain flares up and disappears on occasion. I saw her when she was in pain, and she was holding her sides like you would if you were stabbed, and that point she’s beyond any reasoning. But then I also saw her pain disappear, as if she just completely forgot about it, and at that point she just bores me. I can’t enjoy killing her like that, so I just let her go.”

“Okay, Shiki, first off, she wouldn’t even last a day with a rebar in her intestines.” Miss Tōko comments. “A wound that keeps hurting...even after it’s completely healed, huh?” she muses, slowly and pensively. She takes out a cigarette, her favored companion when thinking things over hard.

I, too, am puzzled by Shiki’s observation of Fujino Asagami. It’s natural for a wound to hurt until it heals, but why would a wound that’s completely healed suddenly come back from time to time? It’s almost like she could dull her nerves

and stay the pain, making it linger.

And then I suddenly remember the little trivial detail in Keita Minato's bizarre story, when I asked him what was so weird about her. It isn't an answer to her condition, but anything helps at this point. The recollection comes so suddenly that I shout an "Oh!" unintentionally.

"'O' was always my favorite vowel. It's very well-rounded," says Shiki in response.

"Very funny, Shiki. Actually, I remembered something Keita told me that might be related." Miss Tōko looks at me with an eyebrow cocked, curious now. "He told me that they did all sorts of things to her, including beating her to within an inch of her life, and she wouldn't so much as make a frown. At first, when Keita told me this, I thought that she was just a really strong girl and that she just didn't want to give them the satisfaction of knowing that they angered her. But now I realize that isn't it at all."

"Oh, yeah right, as if you know her," says Shiki sarcastically in a mockery of my voice while looking sharply in my direction. "Sound familiar?" "Okay, fine, maybe I don't know her, but isn't there a sickness that makes you insensitive to pain? Maybe she could have one of those. I know it's a rare condition, but that would explain all of this."

"It would explain some things," Miss Tōko agrees, "but not all. If she was really insensitive to pain, then the wound wouldn't really hurt. That's not the way Keita described it, though. At any rate, we'd need to investigate it for sure; whether or not it was congenital and things like that. Well, assuming she is insensitive to pain, then was there anything that could have changed that? I'm talking about things that mess up your nerves like being whacked hard in the back or getting a large dose of steroids in the neck."

"A hit on the back? Well, I don't really know how hard it was, but Keita told me one of his friends took a metal bat and swung it at her back at one point." I try to restrain my voice to hold back how angry the whole story made me. Miss Tōko emits a strange laugh.

"You know what? That could actually be it. The way you and Keita describe these guys, it's likely they fractured her back bone and that somehow jolted her

nervous system back into working condition. Then, with Fujino still disoriented as to what that new sensation was, they violated her. So her first experience of pain was a confused flavor of blunt force trauma and rape. Knowing this, I'm surprised you even sought shelter for Keita Minato. I'd have left him to die on the spot," Miss Tōko says with a grin. Normally, I'd have opposed her attempts at verbally annoying me, but I'm too worn out in thinking about this bizarre case to offer her any more coherent a counter to it than to hang my head and focus my eyes intently on the floor.

"So, do her back bone and her insensitivity to pain have any relation?" I ask.

"There certainly is. The spinal cord is a conduit for all sensations. Problems that lead to pain insensitivity, such as syringomyelia, usually originate in the spine. Now let me paint a scenario for you. See, there are two types of senses: your superficial sense is what you feel outside, such as touch, pain, and temperature. Deep sensation is pain, pressure, and tension felt inside. Now, can you describe to me what it would be like if you had no sensation whatsoever?"

"I guess it'd be like if you can't feel what you touch and can't taste any food, right?"

Miss Tōko nods her head and smiles, clearly enjoying this exercise. "Exactly the sort of answer someone used to sensation would give. We think that because that just because they still have bodies, that their experience is largely the same as ours, if perhaps less visceral. But that couldn't be farther from the truth. Understand, Kokutō, that to have no sensation is to lack the ability to truly assimilate experience."

I don't really understand. I mean, she can still hold things and talk to people. It's just that when she touches something, it's probably a less visceral experience, right? Why wouldn't she be able to assimilate experience? It's not like she doesn't have a body. I'd think it'd be worse to have a part of your body cut off, in fact.

It's then that I realize it. She doesn't have a body. Or at least, it's something close to it as to be indistinguishable. She feels *nothing*. The only way to prove to herself that she's touching anything is to look at her hands. It's the same as reading a book, lacking the tactile sensation of the characters. Running, for her,

is just like moving the point of view in a camera in some movie. She doesn't feel the soil on her feet, or the sharp, sometimes painful, rebounding of force, or the wind on her skin, or the wild pain on your muscles as your heart struggles to pump blood. Only her eyes say that she's running at all. *That's* what having no sensation is like: to be without a body, as if you're ethereal, floating like a ghost; to not feel alive. "Seeing is believing" is doubly applicable to someone like her.

"That's...pain insensitivity, huh?" The words almost eave my mouth in a shiver, so shaken am I by the thought.

"Now you're catching on," Miss Tōko says, as if she's been reading my mind. Knowing her, I wouldn't put it past her. "Now, assuming that Fujino Asagami was temporarily cured of this affliction when she was struck across the back with a metal bat, then that would have been her first experience of pain. Her instinct might have been to lash out. How ironic that her return to sensation transformed her into a killer."

"To me, the worst thing that Keita and his friends did is that Fujino now equates the pain to living since it's her first and only sensation so far. So she's out there, right now, seeking more and more pain because it makes her feel alive. They've irreparably damaged her soul," I say.

Without waiting for Miss Tōko, Shiki offers a disparaging laugh as a retort. "Oh, please, her soul? Can we not go there?"

I admit, in my mind, that perhaps I put it a bit too poetic and sentimental, especially for this crowd. I don't think I have an answer that can satisfy Shiki, but fortunately Miss Tōko does.

"Come now, Shiki. Surely you've heard of those incidents where people die from mental stress. It might be true, it might not be, but if it's true for the person, then it can be hurt as surely as you can stab a person's hand." Shiki, looking even more sullen than before, folds her arms across her chest. "Oh, so now you're with Mikiya here on how to handle Fujino Asagami? Is no one hearing me when I say that she is a walking bomb waiting to explode?"

"Keep your hat on, Shiki, I'm still with you on that score." After saying that, she turns back to me again. "Listen, Kokutō. What I'm thinking is that she's never come to love or hate anything precisely because she can't feel anything.

I've already told you how different she sees the world from us. It might not be wise to apply common sense to her. The unfortunate circumstances of her recovery combined with the abilities it gave her compel us to use haste in this situation. It's unfortunate, and I understand your hesitation, but that's what it is."

That last sentence rung out like a final declaration. "Please don't talk like that when you haven't even met her." Unable to stand being here any longer, I stand up.

"I could say the same to you," she parries.

"We're all assuming that her insensitivity to pain was there from birth. What if that isn't the case?"

"You're the one that brought it up," Miss Tōko says, without a hint of rebuke on her voice. How could she be so indifferent to Fujino Asagami's plight? "Actually, now that I think about it, there could be certain scenarios where Fujino would be the victim. The question is which was first?" I wanted to ask Miss Tōko what she meant by that, but she spoke it in a murmur, so I probably misheard it anyway. "Mmm...I'm not sure. What do you think, Shiki?" asks Miss Tōko to the girl who now has her back turned on the two of us.

"I'll go with whatever you come up with. I don't care either way. I just want to take Fujino out. The thought of her killing another person makes me sick."

"No honor among murderers, huh? I guess your kind really can't tolerate each other."

I decide to be on my way to get a head start on this case. "So I guess I'll follow the paper trail on Fujino Asagami. My own way if I have to. Can I see anything you've got on her?" Miss Tōko hands me her file. I can see that her surname changed from "Asakami" to "Asagami", roughly around the time she entered junior high. Her mother remarried, meaning her father right now isn't her real one. She also lived in Nagano Prefecture during elementary school, before she moved when entering junior high. I guess that's as good a place as any to start. "I'm gonna be gone for some time. I might not be back tomorrow. Is that alright, Miss Tōko?"

"No problem. You're part of the job now after all."

I had one last question to her, one that had been bugging me since Keita told me about it. “Miss Tōko, what Keita said, about Fujino being able to move things with her mind; is that parapsychology stuff true?”

“I’m surprised you’re still a doubter at this point when you have me and Shiki right here. One look at that murder scene should tell you that Fujino has powers of some sort. The term parapsychology encompasses a lot of subjects, so if you want to learn more about it, I can point you to the closest thing to an expert.” With that, she takes one of her business cards and writes the address of this “expert” on the back.

“So you don’t know anything about it?”

“No. We mages study the Art of magic as a discipline, but what she has is a result of the lineage and upbringing of her dynasty, one that has been kept secret from mages, and thus, one that has no field of study or history apart from their own. She’s the kind of magic user I hate: one that got her power from a petty dynasty scrapping together what little potential they can muster in their magical lineage, with no training in the responsibilities it implies. Unlike better men, she didn’t deserve it.” Her last sentence was surely no lie, as it was said with her glasses on, the time where she is least deceptive.

I take Miss Tōko’s business card, and then approach Shiki, who’s been whiling away the time by looking outside the window. “Well, see you later, I guess. Don’t get reckless while I’m gone.”

“You’re the one being reckless here. Shame there’s no cure for stupidity,” she snaps back. She nods, though, and grumbles an “I’ll try,” almost silently.

With that, I leave the office, relieved a little bit at Shiki’s reassurance. She’s been quite agitated to go after Fujino Asagami, and I suppose I can understand why. I hope it doesn’t come to violence, but if it does, and they fight, I wonder if Shiki will finally realize that she’s never liked murder. She and Fujino Asagami are more alike than even the both of them realize.

As for my own safety, well, I’m gonna have to say I’ve got great odds. I’ve only tempted death once. Shiki’s forgotten all about that incident ever since she woke up from the coma, but it’s probably better that she doesn’t know. I haven’t told her that she’s the one that almost killed me.

I probably never will.

## / 6

It is the 24th of July, a day after Mikiya Kokutō went out of town to follow the paper trail on Fujino Asagami's past, and it is a day that has so far proven to be, by all estimation, rather uneventful. The only really newsworthy stories for the day are an incoming wallop of a storm predicted to make landfall this evening, and a traffic accident involving a seventeenyear old driving without a license.

Shiki Ryōgi whiles away the lazy morning hours by staring outside the window of Tōko Aozaki's office. Her eyes are fixed on the sky, so blue and cloudless today, with the sun alone being it's only noticeable feature. It seems almost a bad joke that this otherwise stereotypical summer day would soon be disturbed by an invasion of storm clouds. The soundscape is less than idyllic however, as the noise of heavy machinery from the iron factory a few blocks down rings in Shiki's ears without any sign of letting up. She glances at Tōko, somewhat impressed at how she can still conduct the telephone conversation she's in right now without any hint of distraction. With her glasses on, and the receiver in her ear, she spouts a steady stream of words.

"Yes, I'm inquiring about the accident...I see, so the driver had already died before the collision...his head twisted off?...well, with no passengers in the vehicle it does seem like an accident...that's quite alright. Any detective would have a hard time with a *moving* sealed room case, after all...oh, thank you, but that's all I needed to ask. I *must* apologize for bothering you like this detective Akimi. I'll make it up to you somehow."

Tōko on the phone with her glasses on is a show of politeness, a far cry from her usual harsh tones. After hanging up the phone, she adjusts her glasses just a

pinch to lie below her eyes, enough to say that they no longer cover them.

“That’d be the seventh now, Shiki. She’s definitely taken the lead from the serial killer two years ago.” Shiki moves away from the window towards Tōko’s desk. A shame. She’d wanted to see the storm clouds gather in the sky.

“Can’t say I didn’t warn you,” Shiki states bluntly. “Now she’s killing people that she doesn’t even know.”

“Seems that way. This ‘Shōichi Takaki’ fellow”, she says—the name of Fujino’s latest victim—“seems unconnected to Keita Minato as well. This is a murder unrelated to her so-called revenge.”

Shiki grinds her teeth in impatience. She grabs her red leather jacket and dons it over her white kimono in a single, rough motion. “If that’s the case, then I’m sure as hell not sitting around here. Any ideas where I can start looking for her, Tōko?”

“No clue. I can figure two, maybe three areas where she could be hiding. If you’re going to try and find her, you’re just going to have to hit all of them.” She produces three small cards from her desk drawer and tosses them to Shiki, who catches them out of the air. Shiki gives them a quick once-over.

“ID cards from Asagami Construction? Who’s this ‘Sōren Alaya’ character?” The cards each have a magstripe on them, indicating they’re used for identification.

“Those’ll get you into the construction sites that Asagami Construction currently have their hands in. The name’s from a long gone friend, since I couldn’t think up a random name at the time I had those made, but never mind that. Fujino Asagami must be hiding in a place she thinks is secure, and there’s nothing more secure than the family business. She’s got cards like that too, I imagine, to sneak into the places at night. If she’s hiding anywhere, it’s probably going to be in those places. This is going to mean trouble, so if you’re going to do it, do it before Kokutō comes back.”

Shiki glares at Tōko, her normally empty eyes now giving the mage a piercing look. It is a wordless objection at the last advice she chose to impart, but in the end Shiki turns around to leave. She’ll follow Tōko’s lead on this one, even if that means leaving Mikiya in the dark. Shiki leaves the office in no particular

hurry, the gentle clacking echo of her boots audible even after she walks out of the door. As the little footsteps fade, it is now Tōko's turn to look out the window.

"Kokutō's too late on this one, huh?" the mage murmurs to herself. "Two storms out there tonight, and I don't know which of them will come and which of them will break first. *Shiki* might not last the night alone, Ryōgi."

Past noon, the weather starts to take a turn for the worse when dull, ash-colored clouds slowly begin to creep along the sky. The wind is picking up as well, and the people on the streets quicken their paces, all of them seem to be talking about a coming storm. While I walk, burning pain shoots through my abdomen even as I clutch it tighter. Preoccupied as I was with my hunt for Keita Minato's friends, I heard no news about the storm. It will make it difficult to search, so I decide to call it off for tonight. I spend the last, fleeting hours of the afternoon making my way across town to the port, and I see the city slowly lower its tempo over the hours, and the volume of people steadily decrease.

Though it is only 7:00 in the evening in summertime, the sky had long since become dark. Even the seasons grow mad at the coming of the storm. My body shares the sentiment, as it continues to become sluggish and my reactions become slower with each passing day. With effort, I finally arrive at the Broad Bridge, Father's pet project, which bridges this coast and the one across the bay. With four lanes on either side and passages and walkways for people underneath, it is quite the structure. The "basement" is a shopping mall. The main entryway into the bridge is guarded, but I know the same isn't true for the shopping mall entrance. Having made my way there, I take one of the cards that I stole from the manor, and swipe it through the receiver.

The door opens welcomingly to a dark passageway. The structure and the interior design of the mall had already been finished, but the lights were yet to be connected, making the entire thing look like a subway station about to close up for the day. The lack of light made the mall promenade stretch onward for what

seemed like an interminable distance, with shops of various products flanking it. After walking about five hundred meters, however, the surroundings abruptly change, indicating that I had reached the parking lot. The wall that divided it and the mall was unfinished, so I didn't notice it. As a matter of fact, the entire parking lot was still under construction. The iron rebars on the walls, exposed as they are like a person's bones, make the entire structure look fragile. Some of the wall sections are, as yet, unbuilt, making the room exposed to the outside if not for the simple tarpaulin covering the breaches.

It's been an hour since I entered the bridge interior, and the storm is already raging. The howling wind is especially audible here in the parking lot, where the violent flapping of the canvas, the roar of the waves, and the pitter-patter of the raindrops like machine gun fire combine to make a cacophony I can barely endure. It was raining that day too, on the night of my first murder. I let the warm raindrops wash over me and watched as the dirt, the grime, and the slick blood trickled from my hands. And then I met him, the man who I had last met in junior high, who had shared with me only a single conversation.

No other memory do I treasure more than the day I first met him, when the horizon looked almost ablaze in the sunset. A cross-school event had only just finished, and I was still in the school playing field because of a sprained ankle. Not being able to feel pain, I could try to move, but I saw how swollen my ankle already was, and if I tried to push it any further, I knew it would get to the point where I would damage it beyond recovery. And I didn't want to call out for help, either, because they would all ask me the same questions, asking me about the pain I didn't feel, like I'm some sort of attraction. So I just sat there, alone, staring at the setting sun with a vaguely disinterested expression on my face, praying that no one would notice. No one should ever notice. Not mother, not father, not my teachers, not my friends, no one. I need to be the Fujino that they wanted, the Fujino that was normal.

Somebody tapped me on the shoulder. I never felt it, but I heard his hand land close to my ear. I turned around and there he stood; an upperclassman from another school. His unassuming eyes are of someone refreshingly ignorant of my condition, and yet, on that first time I met him, I think I must have hated him for bothering me.

“Does it hurt?” he said, and I dreaded what would come next. The curiosity. The prying. The false praise that implied fear and disbelief. I shook my head no. He glanced at the name tag on my PE uniform, examined my sprained ankle briefly, and then finally frowned at me. I knew that he was going to ask something I didn’t like next, so I just closed my eyes, determined to just ignore the thoughtless questions that were going to come from someone normal. I didn’t want to hear them. But instead, he said something altogether different.

“Not too bright, are we? Listen, you’re not supposed to hold the pain inside, but show it outside. That way, people can help you, little Fujino.”

He carried me to the nurse’s office without so much as a complaint, and there we parted ways. I might have fallen for him then, for how he worried about me and my suffering like no one else did. It’s a memory that seems more and more like a faint dream with each throb of the pain. The same pain that now brings me back to reality, and dispels the thought from my mind like melting ice. It almost feels as if I’m not...worthy to even remember it, sullied as my hands are in the blood of many people. But the rain has helped me before, like holy water absolving me of sin, and there is no better rain than the one this huge storm brings.

I drag my slowing body to the parking lot ramp leading to the upper portion of the bridge, yearning for the sweet sensation of the summer rain on my skin.

## Lingering Pain - VI

The rain has made shallow puddles form on the four lane asphalt road of the bridge, many of them ankle deep. The raindrops fall in harsh angles with no sign of respite, and the wind howls so fiercely, it almost seems able to topple the street lamps like weak trees. The sky above and the sea below are both fields of total blackness; the lights from the port and the city already so far off and unreachable as to seem like looking at the moon.

A figure can be seen walking in the distance. The black uniform she is wearing gives her the appearance of a raven, blending into the night and barely visible. Her purple lips breathe heavily with each step she takes. When she steps into the light of a street lamp, she comes upon a phantom some distance from her, who now speaks.

“I finally found you, Asagami.” In the midst of the storm’s chaos, the phantom stands, almost ethereal in her white kimono. The red jacket worn over it, flapping in the wind, looks more like a scarf of blood from a distance. Under the light of the lampposts, they look at each other. “Shiki...Ryōgi,” says the raven.

“I told you, you should have gone home like a good little girl. But you’ve tasted blood and found a liking to it. All the killing, all the murder, you’re enjoying it, aren’t you?”

Though separated by ten meters, and dampened by the noise of the wind, their voices carry towards each other clearly.

“Are you not describing yourself?” accuses the raven. “I find no pleasure at all in what I have to do.” Breathing heavily, the raven affixes her gaze on the

phantom, then covers her face with her left hand, the eyes peering out between the fingers shining with hostility and murder. In answer, the phantom readies herself, knife on her right hand.

“Like they say in this country, ‘third time’s the charm.’” The phantom makes a bored laugh. The raven will certainly do for tonight. “Ah, how alive I feel now. We’re murderers you and I, birds of a feather. Just stay the way you are now, and this’ll be quick.”

And with those words, the phantom and raven both move towards each other, whatever chains holding them back now released.

In a sudden burst of speed, Shiki starts to sprint towards Fujino, her pace seemingly unhindered by the wet asphalt and the rain. Only three seconds to close the distance with Fujino, enough time to force her fragile body to the ground and drive a knife through her heart. But Fujino need only look at her target, and on this score, she has the advantage. The three seconds prove to be decisive.

A faint light glitters in Fujino’s eyes. She focuses on Shiki’s left leg as the axis of rotation, and in only a moment, the spell starts to manifest. In that same instant, Shiki feels the pull of the unseen hand on her leg, and with an explosion of force, jumps quickly to one side, making water splash in the opposite direction. But if the spell slackened due to that, it was not to any reasonable amount. This spell was no projectile. As long as Shiki remained within sight of Fujino, she couldn’t escape it.

*I may have underestimated her, goddamit,* thinks Shiki. She runs again, and in an attempt to escape Fujino’s line of sight, her path describes a circle around the girl in black.

“Don’t even think you can esc—“ Fujino starts to say, but is cut off when she sees Shiki take her run all the way to the bridge’s guardrail and leaps forth and downward. A second or two later, Fujino hears the sound of window glass breaking: the roof of the parking lot, right below the bridge. “How reckless of her,” murmur the purple, smiling lips. While she had slipped away for now, Fujino had kept her vision on Shiki’s left hand, and she could swear that she saw Shiki’s jacket sleeve twist. If she was right, she had destroyed her arm.

“I...am the stronger one,” Fujino says, even as the pain in her stomach too grows stronger with her proclamation. Taking the ramp and descending back to the parking lot once again, she attempts to hold back the pain. Her score with Shiki Ryōgi must be settled here, tonight.

To Fujino, the parking lot seems darker than before. Her eyes are still adjusting to the extreme darkness, and it makes navigating her way more difficult than she had expected. Construction materials are also stacked and scattered haphazardly all over the place, and one or two times Fujino almost slipped and lost footing trying to make her way through the convoluted mess. Though only a scant few minutes since their first encounter, Fujino has failed to find any trace of Shiki. Already, she regrets her decision to follow Shiki down here, as all the obstacles make for good cover and concealment for the knife wielding woman. Even if Fujino knew where Shiki is hiding, as long as she couldn’t actually see her, Fujino’s spell would only hit what Shiki was hiding behind.

In that brief clash on the bridge, Shiki had already read Fujino’s spell, and withdrew to a place where she could have a fighting chance. It makes Fujino realize how disadvantaged she is in fighting. *Even so, I am the stronger one*, she thinks. *If I can’t see her, then I’ll strip this place bare.* Randomly, Fujino starts to destroy anything that might offer cover. Support pillars, stacks of iron poles, guardrails, wall partitions—with each twist and crack of concrete, Fujino’s pain throbs faster, and the tremors in the building grow stronger.

“Okay, now you’ve officially lost it,” resounds a voice in the shadows. Fujino turns toward it, the sound seeming to come from behind a pile of construction materials. She destroys it in a blink of an eye, only to see Shiki dart out of it to the side. Wasting no time, she rushes towards Fujino.

“I have you!” Fujino exclaims, and sets her sights on the phantom clad in white. Shiki continues her charge, her bloodied and battered left arm outstretched.

There is a moment’s hesitation from Fujino, and then she works her spell. With a sickening crunch of ripped sinew and bone, she bends Shiki’s already wounded arm, and finally breaks it. But when Fujino casts her eyes on Shiki’s neck to

finish the job, she finds that the girl is but one solid pace from her.

Shiki's knife catches light for an instant and glints. She thrusts straight towards Fujino's carotid artery in a graceful, merciless path, the glint on the blade seeming to leave a silvery thread as the cold steel travels through the darkness.

But Fujino saw Shiki smiling malevolently, even while her arm had already been viciously destroyed. Terrified at the sight of it, Fujino had moved long before Shiki's thrust had even started, and she was already ducking under the knife when it neared her.

Clicking her tongue at her miscalculation, Shiki recovers from her missed attack, readies her knife for another strike, and starts to spring towards the offensive again, but not before Fujino recovers from her daze and weaves her spell at Shiki's torso.

“GO AWAY!” yells Fujino, unleashing her attack at the same time. Shiki, for her part, decides that she missed her chance and evades the pointblank blast by a hair’s breadth. It only takes her a leap and a moment’s sprint to recede back into the shadows that concealed her well only seconds ago. A good opponent: she knows when to retreat. “Is she crazy?” murmurs Fujino between deep, ragged breaths; for once not borne from her stomach pain, but from the rush of adrenalin and the nervousness starting to set in. Her vision darts from shadow to shadow, scanning them for movement. She never saw where Shiki chose to hide, and she has no idea when and where she’ll choose to strike from again.

Fujino feels the nape of her neck, where Shiki had almost hit her. As it turns out, the knife had nicked her flesh there a little, a wound making itself known when Fujino lightly brushes a finger over it. *I destroyed her arm, but why didn't she stop?* She keeps replaying the moment in her head: how she crushed Shiki’s arm and she kept on coming, her eyes, her sadistic grin. Shiki was enjoying this. *I'm panicking, even though I sent her running, and yet she enjoys herself! It almost seemed as if she was actually happy that I destroyed her arm.*

*I've not enjoyed a single one of my murders, but she's different. All the fighting, all the murder, it must be like a drug to her, and the more extreme it is, the more enjoyment she gets out of it.*

And yet, Fujino tries to dispel from her memory how sweet she thought the

fragrance of blood was on her first murder, how soft the touch of blood on her hands were, and how they gave rise to a feeling beyond words that gripped her heart. The pain that she felt seemed like life to her, and it only seemed logical for her to discover herself in the pain of others. Though it is a sensation she has tried to escape since that accursed night, she finds that the pain of others stimulates her, as it makes her imagine the pain they go through. There is no better thing that makes Fujino feel alive than this fascination and feeling of control. But these are thoughts she dare not entertain and tries her hardest to deny.

*If, like me, Shiki feels disconnected from her own life, then what does she do to compensate for that disconnection?*

“Ah, fuck, that did not go too well,” utters Shiki to herself, out of sight behind a pile of debris that was once a wall, courtesy of Fujino’s crude method of searching earlier. The left arm that Fujino had twisted was long dead. Shiki had thought that since it was just a pile of useless flesh anyway, that she’d use it as a shield and bet it all on one decisive attack, but Fujino accidentally gained a new lease on life thanks to her unexpected cowardice.

Shiki takes off her jacket and uses her knife to cut off a sleeve. With some creative application of her mouth and remaining arm, she wraps the sleeve around her left upper arm, fashioning a crude dressing to stem the bleeding. She can’t feel anything from it anymore, and the thought that she might never be able to move it again gives her a momentary chill, but also a strangely gratifying sensation. *Keep it up Asagami! You’ve been handling this fight like a pro so far, thinks Shiki. Then again, that sensation just might be her consciousness slipping due to rapid blood loss. Well, Mikiya always said I was as stubborn as a mule. At the very least, it’ll clear my head some.*

This fight with Fujino is exactly the kind of experience Shiki signed up for, a battle where one slight misstep can mean curtains for both of them. The excitement Shiki draws from the tension of mortal combat is like a drug. And to Shiki, who constantly feels imprisoned in her own unreliable memory, this is the only thing that can affirm the small spark of life still left in her, and allow her to declare it as her own. Base and primal perhaps, but it gets the job done. If Fujino Asagami seeks pleasure in murder, as Shiki thinks, then Shiki uses it to feel alive again.

Shiki listens to the echo of Fujino inhaling, then exhaling...a pause, and then it repeats—strained, deep breaths that betray her pain and her trepidation. Though Fujino is yet to be injured, her breathing is as labored as Shiki's. In the darkness, the cycle repeats itself, creating a sort of metronomic rhythm: they inhale and exhale at the same pace, their hearts simultaneously pump blood in their adrenaline-fueled bodies, and their thoughts are mutually focused on each other, twins on the swaying cradle of the Broad Bridge, rocked and buffeted by the storm. And for the first time, Shiki feels some semblance of affection towards Fujino, so much so that she feels the need to wring the life out of Fujino with her own hands.

*Even though I know there's no need for me to,* Shiki thinks. She's known since meeting her in the café that she was already damaged goods, and quite close to dying outright. There was no real need for her to come here and fight her. But that's how humans live. Shiki thinks back to what Tōko said some time ago, that humans are creatures who give meaning to meaningless actions, and derive purpose from it.

And like this situation, some people would scorn it as meaningless, while others would derive purpose from it. Where does one begin and another end? You establish your own boundary while the consensus of others ultimately determines it. The world is full of such empty boundaries. *That's why the ones who get to decide where the edge lies are the ones who toe the line: like me, or Mikiya, or even Fujino. We aren't so far from each other, Fujino and me. But this place isn't big enough for both of us psychos.*

“Another dance, then,” Shiki whispers again. “But this time, with my Eyes seeing the strings in your special effects magic.” Shaking her head to bring back some bit of the consciousness she’s already lost with the blood, Shiki stands up. Her right hand holds the knife with a firm grip.

If Fujino won’t back off herself, then Shiki will just have to eliminate her.

Shiki reveals herself to Fujino, emerging from behind her cover a stone's throw away. Given that her body temperature is already over 39°C, Fujino can't be blamed for not thinking that her condition isn't giving her any hallucinations. She blinks once, just to confirm that what she's seeing is real.

“You’re insane to come out of hiding like that,” Fujino says. She wastes no time, immediately focusing her will on working the spell. Her vision begins to distort. She wills one axis of rotation each for Shiki’s head and legs, and bends. Like cheap cloth, Shiki’s body is torn apart into so many bits and pieces.

Or at least, it was supposed to be.

Before any such damage could be dealt, Shiki raises her right arm, and with a single slash, excises Fujino’s “distortion.” The points of rotation Fujino had created are warded away by the knife, dying as easily as any living being.

“Things without form are difficult to see,” Shiki begins to say. “But thanks to you firing that spell all over the place too much, I can finally see it. Your spell’s nimbus is a spiral of green and red. Really quite beautiful, if I do say so myself.” Fujino has no idea what she’s saying. The only thing she knows right now is the primal instinct of prey: if she can’t stop Shiki, she’ll kill her. In her mind, Fujino repeatedly utters her pathetic curse, trying to will it into reality.

*Bend! Bend! Bend! Bend!*

With each repetition, a new manifestation of the spell appears in the air in front of Shiki, but she dispels it each time with a swing of her knife, and each time the pain in Fujino’s stomach is pushed further and further to its limit.

“What...*are* you?” Fujino and Shiki lock eyes. Fujino sees only a deep emptiness, and Shiki sees only fear.

“There’s a flaw for everything in the world,” says Shiki. “Air, intent, and even time. Humans need not even be said. If there’s a beginning for everything, then there’s also an end. My Eyes see that end, the death of everything. And once I see that death, all anything needs is a single, light push, that sends it barreling off into entropy. Magic, just like yours.” With those sinister Eyes, Shiki glares at Fujino. “That’s why, if there really was a God, he would fall just as easily against me.”

And with that, Shiki runs at Fujino, every footfall barely touching the ground; an ease of movement that belied her injured state. As Shiki approaches, she tackles Fujino and, sitting on top of Fujino with both legs straddling her body, she pins her to the ground. With her executioner now so close to her, Fujino’s throat trembles.

“Are you...going to kill me?” Fujino asks, her mouth quivering. Shiki does not offer a response. “Why are you going to kill me? I’ve only killed because I was in pain.” At this, Shiki laughs.

“Still in denial? Then riddle me this: why are you doing that same smile you did back when we last met? Even now, you look like you’re enjoying yourself. Why is that?”

“That’s impossible.” Fujino almost hesitates to say it. Slowly, she places a hand on her cold lips. Without a doubt, it’s bent into the rictus of a smile. She tries to remember what her face looked like in the puddles of blood borne from her murders. Did they, too, reflect a smiling face? *I always felt something every time I committed murder. Was it happiness like Shiki says? Even when I was violated, I felt no pain, so did I turn to murder to pleasure myself?*

“In the end, this is all so much fun to you. You can’t help but be attracted to causing pain, and that’s why you’ll never stop suffering. You’d keep killing without a reason except for yourself.”

“That’s...the answer?” murmurs Fujino. She can’t accept it. She doesn’t even want to think about it. I’m different from you, she keeps repeating in her mind. But Shiki’s reply destroys everything.

“Hell, I should know. I said it before, didn’t I? We’re similar, birds of a feather.”

Shiki raises her knife, and Fujino cries out one last, desperate call: a scream, as hard and as strained as she can perform at the top of her lungs, for one last pathetic curse.

“BEND!”

And as if in response, the parking lot building trembles with the force of an earthquake. In the moment before Shiki’s knife falls, Fujino’s mind wanders to the outside, to the raging storm, and the violent waves in the bay. Resisting the burning sensation her fever has in her mind, she envisions both ends of the bridge, like a view from on high. One axis of rotation for either end—

And then they bend.

A tremor resounds, like scores of thunder all happening at the same time. The walls and the iron bars inside them groan and scream, while the ground itself cracks and tilts in upheaval. Similar cracks slowly snake their way across the ceiling, with little pebbles falling away from it. Though the entire structure is collapsing in on itself, Fujino can only stare. Shiki had been on top of Fujino until a moment ago, when she inadvertently slipped when the floor gave way, as if the ground itself swallowed her up. If Fujino didn't move now, the same thing might happen to her. She knew, though, that with the athletic ability Shiki had so far demonstrated, it is likely she survived. It would only be a matter of time before she returned to the chase.

Outside is the storm, and below her, the bay. Though burning with fever and burdened with a body that seems adamant to refuse her mind's commands, Fujino manages to will herself to stand up. Slowly, she begins to walk, extricating herself from the parking lot towards the shopping mall, which has so far sustained little damage. Still, the once rectangular promenade is now bent in places.

It only takes her a few steps before collapsing face-down on the floor. It's taking her an enormous effort to even breathe, let alone move her legs. Her head is in a daze, and her sight is failing her. The only thing she feels right now is the one thing that has been her constant travelling companion: the violent pain inside her body. *I'm going to die, thinks Fujino for the first time in her life. It hurts so much, I can't take it anymore. If living on means enduring this searing ache, then perhaps it's better to just die.*

Stunned and lying prone on the ground, Fujino coughs, and this time, blood comes with it. With her quickly fading vision, only the slow spread of the blood she's vomiting is clearly visible. Red blood, like the blood red memory of a time long past: the burning horizon etched in her mind, forever lighted by the setting sun.

“No, I don't...want to die,” she whispers weakly, fighting her earlier thoughts while reaching an arm out in front of her. If her legs won't cooperate, then her arms will just have to do. She makes slow progress crawling on the ground, inch by bloody inch, but she is driven forward by her fear of death, and its white phantom harbinger. The only sensation that Fujino can feel now is the lingering

pain.

*It hurts.*

*It hurts.*

*It hurts.*

That simple declaration is the only thing Fujino can bring to mind. Now that she has finally gained a sense of pain, ironically, she has grown to detest it. The pain feels like a hundred different needles all in her stomach, but Fujino can't allow herself to die now. Not now, when she has done nothing, but so much more is left to do. *Too pathetic, too empty, too miserable.*

The needles bury themselves deeper, burning her stomach like an acid. She's losing more ground to it every second, clawing at life madly, searching for something that can make it easier.

*It hurts.*

*It hurts.*

*It hurts.*

*It hurts.*

*It hurts.*

*My life, my words, my memories; I want all of them to linger on like the pain of a scar.*

The words echo in her mind, echoing the pulse of the pain. It's the same pain as the one she used to make the other people suffer, the realization of which is the most painful thing of all. The weight of the blood she has spilled presses so heavily in her mind that she cannot even bring herself to an empty apology. Her body convulses, and the blood in her throat is the sign of the last gasp of pain. When she vomits the blood, her vision, and what little light she sees, starts to sink into darkness. Her mind only brings her back to that rain-soaked night, when he met him again, and he asked her if her stomach hurt. To that memory of him, she speaks the desire she has kept for so long, a thing she wished she could have said much earlier.

“It hurts—so much...so much that I could cry.”

And to the memory of her dear mother, she asks a final question. “Mother, is it all right for little Fujino to cry?”

Alone and in sorrow, all Fujino can do is cry, but somehow, doing that eases the pain. He was right. You’re not supposed to hold the pain inside, but show it outside. I’m glad I met him again, so he couldn’t see me like this.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” someone says to Fujino, barely audible at the edge of her consciousness. Almost blind, Fujino can only just make out Shiki standing next to her, knife still in hand. “If it hurts, then you should have said so earlier.” The words ring out like a farewell. *Yes, that’s what he would have said too. If I could have only said it on that day three years ago, if I just let everything out, what could have happened? What path would I have taken? I can’t even imagine a better life now. I’ve committed so many sins, taken so many lives, all for the sake of my own pleasure, that I can’t bring one to mind.*

Fujino stops her breathing, and in those last few seconds, the pain finally fades. She never feels the knife swooping downwards, piercing her chest.

## Lingering Pain - VII

The storm is just hitting the height of its ferocity when I get back into town. Braving the rain, I immediately make my way to the office, and when I enter, Miss Tōko greets me by accidentally letting the cigarette in her mouth fall off because of her surprised look.

“Well, that sure was fast. It’s only been a day,” she remarks.

“As soon as I heard there was a storm coming, I came back before they stopped public transportation.”

“I...see,” Miss Tōko says with apprehension. Her eyebrows are scrunched up in a look of consternation. Did something happen? Before that, however, there are more pressing concerns she needs to know about. “Ma’am, I’ve checked back on stuff about Fujino Asagami, and found out that her pain insensitivity is acquired, not congenital. She was normal until she was six years old.”

“Wait a minute, that can’t be right. Look, if she wasn’t born with the damn condition, then it has to be something like syringomyelia, but that causes you to have physical complications, which Fujino doesn’t have. A rare case like hers where only the pain sensitivity is gone can’t be anything but congenital.”

“I know. Her doctor said the same thing. Let me explain a few things,” I reply. It would be nice to tell her the whole story I learned from going to Nagano, but since we don’t have time I’ll just have to go over the more important parts, when Fujino was still a part of the Asakami family.

“The Asakami family, Fujino’s original family, was a well-known dynasty in Nagano, but they fell into bankruptcy around when Fujino was twelve years old.

Fujino's mother than remarried into the Asagami family, a distant branch of the Asakami's. The Asagami's, for their part, only wanted the Asakami land, and shouldered the debt only for that purpose. In her childhood days, Fujino was still sensitive to pain, but the people I talked to said she also had a strange power. She could make things bend without touching them."

Miss Tōko lights up a cigarette and inhales a long one. She sits down behind her desk before waving the cigarette at me, motioning me to continue.

"She was treated like a demon child, and was shunned and even abused by most of the other kids, verbally and physically. But when she was around six, the power went out of her for some reason, along with her sense of pain." Miss Tōko narrows her eyes in interest, and I see the subtle beginnings of a smile playing at the tips of her mouth. "I found out that the Asakamis hired a personal doctor for Fujino around that time too, but no one could tell me who he was, and the Asakami manor was unoccupied and abandoned, so I couldn't ask there."

"Wait, are we done? Don't tell me that's all the dirt you got?" "Patience is a virtue, ma'am, so let me finish. I followed up on some police and local government records and found him pretty easily. The doctor was a guy named Akita. He's an unlicensed doctor, which I guess is just how the Asakami's preferred it. Took me the better part of a day to pry a story out of him."

"See, now you might really get paid this month. When I eventually fire you, Kokutō, you might want to consider being a detective. I'd even hire you from time to time."

"Gee, thanks," I reply in sarcastic monotone, and then continue the story. "Seems this doctor was more like a pharmacist, since he only sold medicine. Asprins, indomethacin, steroids, stuff like that. He didn't know how Fujino became pain insensitive either, because apparently the father did it himself."

"Wait, what do you mean? That Fujino's father cured her by himself, or administered the medicine by himself?" A subtle difference, one I recognize by nodding my head.

"The latter, of course. The father apparently had no intention of curing Fujino of her pain insensitivity, but the doctor diagnosed her all the same. He said the possibility of her having something called 'neuromyelitis optica' was high."

“Neuromyelitis optica...Devic’s disease, huh?”

“I’m sorry ma’am, but you’re going to have to enlighten me on this one.”

“It’s a type of myelitis, and another disease where your senses slowly go numb, apart from weakening your legs and a gradual degradation of eyesight, all the way until you’re blind. They usually give you steroids early on to treat it, and indomethacin to lessen the pain.” Miss Tōko giggles lightly, the same kind of laugh she always does when she comes up with a solution to a difficult problem. It’s always a bit scary, kind of like the professor I talked to yesterday. “Now I see. Yeah, no wonder she became like that. Hers isn’t congenital or acquired, but something artificial. She was made to lose her sense of pain. I see what that family tried to do now. Exactly the opposite of what the Ryōgi dynasty does.”

I try to brace myself for the wave of half-monologue, half-dialogue that she is inevitably entering, and ask for more clarification. “So what exactly is this ‘indomethacin’ stuff?”

“A drug for pain relief. See, whatever kind of wound you get, you get pain, and it’s a reaction to outside influences that are impeding you. Your body produces some chemicals that stimulate some nerves that send a signal to your brain saying ‘Oh my God, I am going to die,’ and that’s how you get pain. Aspirins and indomethacin work by controlling your prostaglandin production, and in turn your arachidonic acid, which sensitizes your neurons to pain. A large enough dose of indomethacin can basically take away your pain.”

Miss Tōko says all of this in almost one breath, and her face has that rare look of enjoyment that she finally has an opportunity to explain all of this. Honestly, though, these “arachidons” and stuff all sound like dinosaur names, and it’s really all Greek to me. “So in other words, it’s medicine that numbs you to pain, right?”

“Well, not *exactly*,” she replies. “Opioids would probably be much better. Stuff works like endorphins in your brain: gets you right up, and makes your central nervous system work smooth as butter, but—” I glare at her sharply to indicate that she should probably hold back on explaining more medical terms. “Oh... well, we’ll leave that subject alone for now, I guess. Point is, Fujino’s father knew that her power was tied to her sense of pain, and he wanted to block it I

suppose, but Fujino's capability for sensation had to go with it. That's why the father made Fujino OD on painkillers. Quite unlike the Ryōgi dynasty, who until this day still perform tireless rituals to get heirs close to magical potential. Sadly, the only result is that Fujino's power wasn't snuffed out, only suppressed for a time, and now it's coming back in a big way. Kind of like when the mages around northern Africa sew their eyes shut, the paradigm being that it prevents mana from 'leaking out', except with Fujino it's possibly less disturbing."

Surprisingly enough, I recognize some of what Miss Tōko is saying. The same dubious rumors circulated when I was in Nagano: of the old Asakami family occasionally producing children who, like the professor put it, played an entirely different card game. These children, born with supernatural capabilities, were shunned. So they finally resorted to medicines to artificially dull the pain, and the powers.

"The worst part is how she can never go back to normal," I respond. "Whether she's taking the medicine and loses her power, or not taking them and getting the powers back. The professor you referred me to called her a 'living paradox', because she doesn't have the necessary subconscious ability to assimilate experience like others do, like you said, and so she can't sympathize with anybody. If only she was still pain insensitive at on that night, then just maybe she wouldn't have started to kill."

"Come now, let's not denigrate pain," Miss Tōko says, cutting me off. "You blame one thing, you make sure it's the wound. No matter how much it hurts, we need pain. Do you think you pull your hand out of the fire because it's on fire? No, you pull it out because it's hot and it hurts. If we didn't have pain, we wouldn't pull our hands out until it's a smoldering stump. Just look at Fujino Asagami, who, as soon as her sense of pain returned from being struck in the back, proceeded immediately to defend herself. For the first time, she recognized those people were dangerous, and were hurting her. Still, killing them might have been going a bit too far."

"Ma'am, my question from the last time we met still stands. Isn't there anything we can do to help her? Can't she be cured?"

"A wound you can't cure only means death. Unfortunately, I think that's the case we're dealing with now."

Sometimes I really have no idea how Miss Tōko can say things like that. She just put a human life on the spot, and here I am thinking she can still be saved, if only we understood the nature of her pain, if only we— “Kokutō, I’m going to say it once more, with feeling. Hers is the kind of pain that can no longer be healed. Well, it’d be more accurate to say that she wasn’t wounded from the start.”

“Wait, I’m...not sure I know what you mean.”

“Tear your mind away from trying to be the good guy for a second and think about the wound itself. When was the last time you heard a deep stab wound fix itself up in two days?”

“Well, sure that’s true, but...” Wait. If what she’s saying is true, then haven’t we been operating from a mistaken perspective all this time? I must have the most puzzled look on my face since Miss Tōko is covering her mouth with a hand, barely holding back her laughter.

“While I applaud you for researching Fujino Asagami’s past, you neglected looking up what she’s been up to in the present. She’s been seeing a doctor in the city for a month or two now, but she’s neglected to show up in the past twenty days.”

“Whoa, wait a minute. A doctor, here in Tokyo?!?”

Miss Tōko cocks an eyebrow in surprise. “Kokutō, you’re good in investigation and following a lead, but you miss out on some of the most obvious things. The thing that people insensitive to pain are most scared about is something wrong going on in their bodies. Lacking pain, they don’t have the benefit of an early warning system on most of the weird hijinks a body can get into, so they go visit a doctor, much more often than an average person, just so they can get a look-see.”

I have to admit that I missed that one, so driven was I to find out any thing in Fujino’s past that might tell me something about her motivations. Fujino acting in secret means that, at the very least, Fujino’s parents don’t know what Fujino has become now.

“To bring us back to Fujino and the mystery of her wound,” Miss Tōko begins again. “Fujino killing her abusers was the result of a simple misunderstanding,

Kokutō. Those boys forced Fujino down, and their leader brought out a knife. Fujino thought she was going to get stabbed—and she really was going to!—but she had already recovered her sense of pain at that point, and she probably unconsciously used her power. Between the stab and the twisting, Fujino’s was faster. What I’m seeing is that she twisted the head off of that guy like a fucking screw, and the blood spatter struck Fujino, making her think she was stabbed.”

I shake my head, trying to rid my mind of the visceral images Miss Tōko’s story is conjuring up. “There’s something wrong with that story. If Fujino’s sense of pain had returned, then she wouldn’t make that misunderstanding. There wouldn’t be any pain if she wasn’t really stabbed.”

“Fujino was in pain from the start, really,” Miss Tōko immediately replies. “I made the doctor that Fujino saw recently show me her clinical records. She’s has chronic caecitis, more commonly known as appendicitis. The pain in her abdomen isn’t from a knife, but from inside her body. If her sense of pain returned right before she was stabbed, the pain in her stomach told her mind that she was already stabbed. It must have happened so fast, Fujino was confused. Having been raised for most of her life not knowing pain, she didn’t even check to see if she actually was stabbed, because she didn’t have the experience of hurting real bad before, and the steps that people normally take in those situations. She’d look at her stomach and interpret the lack of a wound as a sign that it was already healed.”

“So it’s all just one big misunderstanding?”

“The wound itself is. But it doesn’t change the facts: Fujino’s been pushed over the edge. Ignoring whether or not she was even stabbed, the fact that the leader had brought a knife that night meant that he was serious about killing Fujino. The only way she could have escaped that bar was to kill them. Unfortunately for Fujino, Keita Minato escaped. If everything was settled on that night, she might not have gone this far.” Miss Tōko snuffs out the cigarette she’s smoking and reaches into her pack for a fresh one. “Like Shiki said, she’s beyond help now.”

“Both of you keep saying that, but why is she?” I say, anger rising in my voice.

“Shiki was probably talking about the mental side of things. Fujino’s quest for

revenge against the five people who violated her is, while murder, still somewhat justifiable. She crossed the line when she started killing people unrelated to that incident. It's the lack of any sense or reason behind it that truly made Shiki after Fujino's blood. Despite having a taste for murder, I think Shiki still understands the weight of death, and the toll murder takes on someone. Notice how she doesn't just slaughter people on the street willy-nilly. Fujino indulged her more primal passions, and Shiki can't forgive her for that."

Is Fujino really indulging, I wonder, or is she just running away? Miss Tōko continues:

"That's Shiki's reasoning, but I'm talking how she's 'beyond help' physically. Appendicitis, when left alone, can rupture your appendix and cause peritonitis. The inflammation results in extreme pain, probably comparable to being stabbed with a knife. Then you start getting fevers, cyanosis, shock from low blood pressure, all that good stuff. When it reaches the duodenum, you can die in half a day. It's already been five days since the night of the 20th, and the appendix should long have ruptured now. Sad, but it's terminal—she's gonna bite it." She says it clinically, with all the weight and delicacy of someone reporting on a science class. I'll never be able to understand how she does that.

"Maybe if we hurry, we can still find her and—"

"Kokutō, the client for this job is Fujino Asagami's father. The patriarch of the Asagami family told me himself. They can't risk a scandal like this leaking out to the public, not with their well cultivated business reputation on the line. The father must've known the family secret, and recognized the true nature of the incident on the bar as Fujino's doing. He hired us to take her out, a 'monster' by his own words. Strange, isn't it? The father is supposed to shelter their daughter. But now he's the one taking a check out of his wallet to let us kill her. The world really is against her." She concludes with a long, exasperated sigh. "We finish this job tonight. Shiki already left."

Unbelievable. I tried to stop this, but now it's actually happening. "Son of a bitch," I utter inadvertently. Whether it is directed to myself, Miss Tōko, Shiki, Fujino's father, or Fujino herself, even I don't know.

## Lingering Pain - VIII

I eventually convince Miss Tōko to at least go out and find Shiki, and so we head out in her car. With Broad Bridge being the largest construction project that the Asagami's are involved in, and with plenty of places to hide, we conclude that it's the likeliest location for Fujino to seek refuge, and the likeliest place for Shiki to be. Miss Tōko runs red light after red light in her off-road buggy, and when we near the bay shoreline the bridge comes into view, looking like a giant squeezed and twisted it with his hand.

Nearing the front entrance, we're stopped by a security guard. Miss Tōko starts to argue with him while Shiki, with bloodstained left arm, emerges from the corridor behind the guard. Wordlessly assessing the situation in a glance, she braces and delivers a running tackle to the guard, dealing him a particularly nasty blow to the head. He is knocked out instantly, a victim of Shiki's particular style of negotiation. She greets us.

"Yo. Somehow, I thought you'd be here," Shiki says. Her face is pale, whether from the cold rain or the blood loss, I couldn't say. I had a mountain of things to say to her regarding this whole ridiculous hunt, but when I see her at the brink of collapsing, I'm at a loss for words. I try to extend a hand to support her, but she swats it away with her own.

"Might as well have finished it with one hand tied behind your back, I see," says Miss Tōko, surprised. Shiki grants her a glare of dissatisfaction. "Tōko, that girl had a last surprise. She developed some sort of remote viewing spell in the end. That and her other power makes for a dangerous combination if left alone."

“Remote viewing? Like scrying or clairvoyance? That is bad. She’d be able to hit you with a spell even if you were hiding behind cover. Wait—‘if left alone’?”

Shiki sighs. “Well, her pain insensitivity switched back on at the last moment. Fucking unbelievable. Without pain, she just denied me the pleasure of seeing her suffering face. So I said to myself, ‘what the hell, why don’t I just kill her disease while I’m here’. So I saw the lines on her disease, cut ‘em, and here we are. If you hurry and get a hospital on the line, she still might make it.”

At first I thought I didn’t hear correctly, but the only thing I understand is that Shiki didn’t kill Fujino Asagami. I immediately pull out my cell phone and dial the number of Fujino’s doctor that Miss Tōko gave me, just to make absolutely sure they’ll send out an ambulance. I’m not entirely sure they could make it in this storm, but if it comes to that, I’d take Fujino to a hospital myself. Luckily, her doctor happily replies that he’ll come immediately, saying that he’d been worried about the missing Fujino. He might have even been crying while talking to me. I’m glad to know she has at least one person on her side in this world.

Oblivious to my joy, Miss Tōko and Shiki are having another one of their odd conversations behind me.

“Nice job stemming the bleeding with your sleeve,” says Miss Tōko, admiring Shiki’s handiwork.

“Yeah, and since it can’t be fixed anymore, I killed it too for good measure. Figured since you were a puppet maker mage, you’d be able to make an artificial arm.”

“No problem, but that’s coming out of your paycheck. I always thought you looked a bit too normal compared to your Arcane Eyes of Death Perception. As an added bonus, I’ll even imbue it with the ability to touch ghosts and other things in that state of being.”

I wish they’d stop talking about all that occult stuff. Gives me the creeps. “They said they’re sending an ambulance. It’ll be a lot of trouble if we stay here, so do you wanna go?”

“With pleasure,” Miss Tōko replies, shivering in the rain. Shiki remains silent. I’m hoping the reason for that is that she wants to see Fujino Asagami off properly.

“I’ll have to stay here, since I’m the one that contacted them and have to give them a situation report. Both of you can probably go.”

“In this miserable rain? You’re a strange one, aren’t you, Kokutō?” Miss Tōko gestures for Shiki to follow her. “Shiki, let’s scram.”

“I’ll pass, thanks.” Shiki replies, which promptly has Miss Tōko smiling mischievously at us all the way back to her buggy.

“Shiki, make sure not to kill Kokutō just because you couldn’t take a shot at Fujino, all right?” She starts the car, and though I can’t hear her from here, I see her laughing even as she backs it up and drives away. In the shade of a nearby building, me and Shiki seek shelter from the summer rain, and before long, the ambulance arrives.

We watch as the EMTs load Fujino into the ambulance. From our distance, I can’t get a good look at Fujino, so I can’t confirm whether or not she’s the same girl I met on the night of the 20th, as I’ve been suspecting. Somehow, I think it’s for the best.

Shiki, wet and cold from the rain, has her empty eyes fixed intently on Fujino Asagami. The night is slowly shifting into dawn, and while listening to the sound of the rain, I air a question.

“Still can’t forgive her, right?”

“She’s dead to me. Got no business with the dead,” says Shiki frankly, but without malice. So she’s decided she no longer cares. That might actually be the best possible result for both their sakes. Shiki throws her glance in my direction. “And you? You’re the one that keeps saying that murder is bad no matter what the reason, right?” It almost seems as if the question is directed as much to herself as to me.

“Yeah, but I sympathize with her. To be honest, I’m not feeling anything towards the corner boys Fujino killed.”

“Well, isn’t that surprising. I was hoping I could hear the dulcet tones of your familiar generalizations.” I don’t know if Shiki wants me to be angry at her or not, but it doesn’t matter. She didn’t kill anyone. I close my eyes and try to listen to the sound of the raindrops falling.

“Well, take it or leave it. I still think that, despite her losing her way, she’s still a normal girl. When she looks back on this, she won’t be selective about what she chooses to remember. She’ll remember what she did, warts and all. And even if she does give herself up, the case is absurd. No one can prove she could have done the murders, and she won’t be punished by society. But that’s what’ll make it so difficult for her.”

“How so?”

“Because I think sins are things people individually carry, a burden that we ourselves make for our own fair share. Our sins become heavier the better our wisdom and common sense, and the greater our happiness. The same goes for Fujino Asagami.”

“Man, *this* is why we call you a big softy. So you’re saying a man without wisdom and compassion doesn’t know the weight of sin?”

“I suppose. But see, there isn’t a person in the world that doesn’t know the weight of a sin. Maybe some people to whom the weight of sin is light instead of overbearing, but the weight is felt all the same, a small sin in the scope of their similarly small compassion, but enough to plant the doubt in him. And soon enough, that doubt grows into something they regret. Though the size differs for each person, each sin carries the same purpose.”

Even for Keita Minato, whose fear of his own sins almost drove him to madness. He has fear and anger, but also regret and guilt. He might never be able to atone, but he can try, at the very least. “It certainly seems easier to not be blamed by society for your own sins, but if no one will judge you, then you carry it yourself. The memories never let the seed go away. You yourself believe that the soul doesn’t exist, Shiki. Guess that means that you can’t heal the wounds in it either.” I conclude with a smile. “And if no one forgives you, you can’t even begin to forgive yourself. The wound in your soul only keeps growing, never healing, like Fujino’s lingering pain.”

In a rare show of contemplative demeanor, Shiki remains silent and actually listens. Without prior warning, she steps out of the shade of the building roof and lets herself be washed over by the rain. “Alright, Mikiya the Poet. You say there are no truly bad people, since compassion and wisdom always makes them

remember their sins. But what about me, who, need I remind you, isn't particularly compassionate or wise. Can you let a person like me run free?"

"Well, there's no curing stupidity. Guess I'll have to carry your sins in your place," I say earnestly. Shiki glances at me blankly, looking very much surprised before casting her eyes downwards.

"Now I remember. You always used to joke with a straight face back in the day. I swear, *Shiki* was terribly annoyed at that."

"Well, I think I can carry the sins of at least one girl with me," I argue. In a rare show of humor, Shiki chuckles.

"I'll tell you one more thing," she adds. "I might have burdened myself with a sin today. But in return, I found out how I wanted to live, and what I want. It's vague and fragile, but for now, it's all I got. And it turns out it's not as bad as I thought it would be, and that makes me just a little happy. It's a little, teensy, weensy bit...of homicidal intent that's leaning in your direction."

That last sentence makes me grimace a little, and yet Shiki still looks beautiful smiling under the rain. The storm is already subsiding, and by morning it will all probably be over. Me and Shiki spend just a few more precious moments there alone, Shiki, smiling, letting the summer rain wash over her like a salve of forgiveness, and me just looking at her.

It is the first real smile she showed me since she woke up less than a month ago.



奈須蘑菇

心王の世界  
THE GARDEN OF SINNERS 中



# **Empty Boundaries: Volume II**

**The Garden of Sinners**

**by Kinoko Nasu (奈須 きのこ)**

# **Stories by Kinoko Nasu**

## **Novels**

Empty Boundaries (空の境界) Series

Volume I: Panorama, The First Homicide Inquiry, Lingering Pain  
Volume II: A Hallow, Paradox Spiral Volume III: Records in Oblivion, The Second Homicide Inquiry

Decoration Disorder Disconnection Series

Junk the Eater HandS

Angel Notes

Mage's Night (魔法使いの夜) Ice Flowers (氷の花)

## **Visual Novels**

Tsukihime (月姫) Series Tsukihime (月姫) Kagetsu Tōya (歌月十夜)  
Fate/stay night Series Fate/stay night Fate/hollow ataraxia

## **Video games**

Melty Blood

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# **Empty Boundaries: Volume II**

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Spiral Paradox - VI

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Chapter 15

Paradox Spiral - VI

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

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Chapter 18

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4 伽藍の洞

garan-no-dou

A Hollow



That which is discordant.

That which is hated.

That which is intolerable.

Accept these things and all others, and never know pain.

That which is harmonious.

That which is desired.

That which is permitted.

Reject these things and all others, and know nothing but pain.

One affirms, one denies.

Between two hearts lies the hollow.

Between two minds lies emptiness.

Between two souls, I reside.

## **A Hallow - I**

“Hey, you’ve heard about the patient on the private room on the third floor, right?”

“Oh, who hasn’t at this point? The word’s been passed on from mouth to mouth since yesterday, and even that poker faced neurosurgeon Dr. Ashika had to show at least some surprise at that girl’s sudden recovery. I couldn’t believe it myself.”

“No, no, I mean the story after that. What do you think the patient did after she woke up from her coma? Promise me you won’t freak out or anything, okay, but she tried to crush her own eyes!”

“Come on, that’s not true!”

“It is! Dr. Ashika’s trying his best to keep it a secret, but I heard the story from one of his interns, so it has to be real. Apparently, she used her palm to put pressure on her eyes in like, the three seconds that Dr. Ashika wasn’t looking. What a horror show.”

“But with that girl in a coma for two years, she really shouldn’t be able to move, right?”

“Yeah, but we basically exercised her limbs everyday to prevent the disuse atrophy. Her family even paid the hospital a mountain of cash just to make sure we do it. Still, it obviously can’t completely stop it, and her body still has trouble moving. Probably why her attempt to destroy her eyes failed.”

“Still, it’s a rarity for a person in bed rest for two years to even move, let alone

poke out her own eyes.”

“That’s why Dr. Ashika was surprised. Wait a minute; what do you call it when the blood vessels in the eye bleed?”

“Subconjunctival hemorrhage, was it? Don’t tell me the girl got that too?”

“You know it. It’s really supposed to heal by itself, but since the ocular trauma was so hard, she’s temporarily blind on top of that. The intern told me that the patient just wanted her eyes bandaged, so that’s what they did.”

“What a shame. Even now that she’s awake she still can’t see anything. Makes my heart tighten a little.”

“It does, doesn’t it? And there’s still the question of her aphasia. Seems she still can’t speak, the poor thing. And since Dr. Alaya left last month we haven’t had a therapist to handle her. But I hear Dr. Ashika’s calling in someone he knows. Until she’s regained some of her mental faculties we’re keeping her on a strict ‘no visitors’ policy. Even the parents are only getting a little time to spend with her.”

“I see. That’s too bad for our little boy.”

“What? Which little boy?”

“Oh, you don’t know! There’s this little kid, right? Well, I guess we can’t really call him a kid anymore, with his age and all. He’s the one who brought that girl over here in the first place, and he still comes to visit every Saturday. I’m really rooting for him to meet her again.”

“Oh, you mean *that* kid. The one everyone was giving nicknames to. I never realized he was still coming. Hard to find that level of sincerity these days, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, he’s the only one that’s been coming to visit her these past two years. He even beat out her parents. Even I’m inclined to believe that part of that girl’s miraculous recovery is because of him.”

“I never thought you were *that* sentimental.”

“That’s alright. Neither did I.”

# / 1

Beyond and below lay only darkness. This void, lifeless place could only mean one thing: I was dead.

Without anything to even clothe me, I, Shiki Ryōgi, floated, and then sank slowly into the fathomless, lightless sea. There was no end in sight. There was nothing in sight, neither light, and yes, perhaps even darkness. This place was only a hollow, where all meaning ceased to be. A stygian abyss that could not be put into words, and without words it shall remain: a cypher called, simply, “ ”.

I fell deeper into the “ ”, and my naked body slowly acquired the pallor of the grave, and it made me want to look away. In my mind, I knew that everything in this place comes to be the same way.

“Is this death?” I whispered, though it came out so faint, I doubted if it was even real.

Though time too had no meaning inside “ ”, I observed it. Like a stream tracing out into the infinite, like the process of decay, I mark it. It was an eternity. I plunged ever deeper, and cast my eyes farther, and in that eternity, this place was still empty, devoid of anything except me. And yet, it was all so calm and serene. It feels as if, in this place without meaning, the fact that I existed at all fits me. Here lay entropy, the end of all things, a place the living may never observe, but only the dead may enter.

I died. And yet I am still alive. I felt my mind about to lose its grip. Two years. An instant, stretched out to an eternity. Both are accurate measures of my time spent in this “ ”. Here, I touched death. Here, I fought for my life. Here, I

awakened.

The light breeze through the window and the sound of boisterous activity outside my room stirs my mind to wake. I can hear nurses and patients alike scurrying in the corridor outside. The sound of their footsteps and the soft whispers of their conversations build to a low background hum, always present at a hospital in the early morning hours. Compared to how silent last night was, this sounded like some sort of convention, and a noisy one, as far as I was concerned. I liked my waking hours silent. Thankfully, in the secluded space of my private room, I'm sheltered from the worst of the noise.

It didn't take long for a doctor to arrive and check up on me.

"How are we feeling today, Miss Ryōgi?"

Silence. It stumps him, and for a moment, we are both quiet.

"I see. At least you've seemed to calm down since last night. Unfortunately, since we didn't get the chance to do it last time, I'm going to have to explain your situation to you. Feel free to talk if you feel something's not right." I didn't really have any interest in paying attention to him, but since it seems like he mistook my lack of a response for consent, it looks like I don't really have a choice in the matter.

"Then I'll tell you straight out: today is the fourteenth of June 1998. Two years ago, on the fifth of March, you were involved in a traffic accident, hit by a car in a pedestrian crossing at night. Then you were brought here, to this hospital. Do you remember anything that I'm saying?"

Silence from me again. The last thing I can remember is someone—a classmate, maybe?—standing stock still in the rain. As for the accident, nothing is coming to mind.

"Oh, don't worry if you can't remember it. When the accident occurred, it's likely you noticed the car and tried to jump out of the way. That's why there isn't any serious damage on your body. On the other hand, you did receive a strong hit on your head. You were already comatose when they brought you here, but it seems there's no brain damage. But your mental faculties might still be recovering from your two year coma. I can't say for sure if your memories will return, but it's looking that way, since last night's EEG detected no

abnormalities in your brain activity. Anyway, the fact that you woke up from your coma is a miracle in itself. There's very little possibility of that after two years, you see."

Even though he makes a point to emphasize the length of my coma, it still isn't hitting home for me. For me, yesterday is still that rainsoaked night, followed by a vast hollow of emptiness.

"And if you're about to ask," the doctor continues, "your eyes are mostly fine. It's just a blunt injury, which rarely damages the eyes in a permanent way. We're lucky there wasn't anything sharp nearby last night. Another week or so, and we'll be able to take off the bandages so you can finally enjoy the nice scenery."

I detect a tiny hint of rebuke in his words this time. I suppose he's a bit frustrated with my little attempt to destroy my eyes. He was pretty persistent last night in asking me why I did it, but I couldn't answer then as well. They'd think I was crazy.

"You're locked into physical therapy sessions, one in the morning, and another in the afternoon. As for visiting hours, I'm afraid we're restricting it until your body and mind are back to normal: an hour a day. Bear with it for a while. Once you're done, you're out of here."

Well, that's a mood ruiner if there ever was one. Not having the heart to voice my cynicism so early in the morning, I instead try to test my right hand's responsiveness by moving it, and find that there is no change. Trying to kickstart it into action takes me a few seconds, and I can feel the joints and muscles straining as I make the most minute, yet painful movements. It almost feels like it isn't my own hand. I suppose it's what I should expect after two years of disuse.

"Well, that's it for this morning. Since you've seemed to calm down, I won't have a nurse watch over you all day today. If you need anything at all—water, a book—just press the button next to your pillow. The nurse's station is right down the hall," the doctor says in the gentle, practiced words designed to put a patient at ease. Were I able to see, I'd probably see him with a similarly rehearsed smile, one he probably practiced in the bathroom mirror all night. I hear him start to open the door, but stops to say one last thing. "Oh, yes, I almost forgot. You'll

have another doctor starting tomorrow, for your speech condition. She's a bit closer to your age, so try to be less...stoic...around her. From what I see, you're going to need the expertise."

And so, after he left, I was alone again. I lie flat on the bed, arms over my eyes that I myself asked to be bandaged shut.

"My name is—", I whisper with dry lips still unused to speech, "Shiki Ryōgi." The same *Shiki* as before? Maybe not. Maybe she was killed, in those two years of emptiness. All of the memories of someone named *Shiki* Ryōgi are all there in my head, all ready for me to draw out. But what of it? What use are they to me, who died once and awoke? I feel so...disconnected to my past self. There's no mistaking I'm me, but the memories in my head don't feel like they are. It's like I'm watching a biopic. Main character: *Shiki* Ryōgi. Weird ghost image caught in some of the frames: me.

I bite my lips until I'm sure I'm still awake. It's all I have to make sure I'm still here. I'm a puzzle with a missing piece close to my chest, and the hole makes my insides feel as hollow as a cave with wind howling through it. I'm missing my reason for living.

"And so? What the fuck does it matter?" I mutter to myself with as much conviction as I can muster. And once I've said that, I feel less troubled by it. Strangely, this feeling of disquiet and irritation that scratches and pulls at my chest is sort of refreshing, in its own way. There's anxiety. There's pain. But those are feelings that the sixteen-year old *Shiki* still held on to. Me? I'm unimpressed. I don't know why I'm still alive but I have no intention of looking a gift horse in the mouth. Not like I feel alive in the first place anyway. I'm just here, now; nursing an existence of being adrift on the wind.

## / 2

Morning turns to night turns to morning again, and a new day comes, whether or not I can see the sunlight. I am strangely relieved that even without sight, I can feel the slow rise of morning. However, the reason for this relief remains a mystery, since the nurse that took my morning examination came and interrupted my thoughts. Before I knew it, she had finished, and left me alone again, but that wasn't the end of my day.

My mother and brother came to talk. They felt like strangers, and I couldn't come to grips with the reality that they were my relatives. Left with no alternative, I managed to mumble little words to them, in the manner that my memories told me *Shiki* would. It made my mother happy at least, and my brother seemed pleased. It all had the air of some comical farce, and we all played our parts to the letter.

Sometime past noon, I hear the door opening and a person step inside my room. As soon as I hear the clicking heels, I immediately know that it isn't anyone familiar. I remember that I was going to get a new doctor starting today, but before I could ask, the newcomer starts to speak.

"Hel—lo! Doing fine today?" says the newcomer, drawing out her hello in an attempt at familiarity. A woman, judging from her voice. "Well, I must say, I expected someone that looked more ghastly, but look at you! Your skin is quite pretty. You're just the kind of girl I can talk to, I think. Now aren't I lucky?" Her voice is young, maybe somewhere in her 20's, and has the kind of lilting, up-and-down quality of someone who is too cheerful for her own good. I hear her make her way to the chair beside my bed and sit herself down.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” she continues. “I’m not a doctor from here so I don’t come with an ID. Still, with your eyes covered and all, I don’t think it’ll be much of a problem. I’m a speech therapist. You know, for your aphasia and—”

“Aphasia? Who, me? I’m sorry; you must have me confused with someone else.” And so I finally speak. She seems like a person worth messing with, so I cut her off mid sentence. It doesn’t seem to faze her however, since she responds with an “Mmhmm”, with what must have been an accompanying nod of the head.

“Now, normally I’d be angry, but since I already know that your aphasia is a misdiagnosis, I’ll let it slide. That Ashika is such a by-the-books doctor; he can’t handle special cases like yours. But hey, it’s not like you can’t share the blame for that. Obviously you’re going to raise some suspicion if you keep your mouth shut like you’ve been doing.” She makes a friendly, amused chuckle. For some reason, I’m imagining her wearing glasses. She just seems like the type.

“So they think I have aphasia?”

“Yep. After all, you did hurt your brain some in the accident, so they must have thought that the part of your brain that puts words in your mouth was damaged. But it’s not that isn’t it? You’re just a stubborn young girl with some issues. That having been said, it’s beginning to look like I’m not needed, but I don’t want to get fired a minute into the job. And since my other job isn’t exactly overflowing with customers, I think I’ll keep you company.”

Well, a minute into her job and she’s already proved herself to be an annoyance I can hardly stomach. I reach a hand out for the button to call a nurse, but the doctor is faster. I feel her hand reach it first and she deftly maneuvers the wire from my reach.

“What the hell, lady?” I utter in indignation.

“Whew, that was close. If you tell Ashika now, the gig is up. Come on, let’s cut a deal here. You pretend to have aphasia and I won’t ask you any stupid questions, they won’t call in a new doctor, and I get to earn some money on the side. That way we both benefit. How about it?”

Well, I have to admit, that sounds like a nice proposition, but definitely illegal

on some level. Still, I have to wonder what kind of person this woman is when she can just belt out something like that without hesitation. I turn my bandaged eyes to where her voice is coming from, hoping I am looking straight at her.

“You’re not a real doctor, are you?” I ask.

“Right on the first try. I make a living as a...magician, of sorts.”

Oh, brother. This just took a turn for the crazy.

“Don’t have a need for a con artist.”

She replies with a chuckle. “I suppose not. A magician can’t fill the hollow in your soul, after all. Only a regular person can do that.” “W—wait a minute, what did you just say?”

“Oh, you must have noticed it. See, you’re all alone now.” The lilt in her voice that I first perceived as cheerful now grants a menacing air to her speech. I hear her stifle the urge for one last chuckle, and then standing up and walking across the room towards the door. “Doesn’t look like you’re in the mood to talk today, so let’s leave it at that for now. We’ll try again tomorrow. By—e.”

By the time she said goodbye, the cheerfulness had returned to her voice. The sound of the door opening and closing signal her sudden departure, as abruptly as she’d arrived.

With difficulty, I put my right hand on my lips. I was speechless at what she’d said.

All alone. A hollow in the soul. It is those words that make me remember. Oh no. Oh, dear God no. How could I forget him?

I can’t find him. In my mind, I call out, over and over, and he, the other me, doesn’t answer. **Shiki** Ryōgi is gone. *He’s gone.*

*Shiki* was once one of those people who suffered another personality, sleeping and residing within her. The reason for it was simple. It was a trait, passed down through generations in the bloodline of the Ryōgi. The legends tell vaguely of some long past flirtation with the occult and arcane, but I don’t know if that can be believed. This trait, which in a normal family would have been cursed, was instead celebrated and honed, an indication of a state of grace. Those born with it

are treated as the heirs to the dynasty.

And so it was with *Shiki*, who was made the heir even over her older brother. She was an aberrant case. The alternate personality will always be a different gender than the actual person. Among the male Yang and the female Yin, the male personality usually emerges as the dominant. In those who carried the trait, all have been born male, but carried a female personality within them. *Shiki* was the first female born. Inside her was another, the man named **Shiki**.

For the most part, the one that controlled the body was still *Shiki*—me, in other words. **Shiki** represented all of my more base aspects and all of the thoughts I struggled to repress. *Shiki* lived only by continually stifling and killing the darkness within herself called **Shiki**, over and over, until it was the only way she knew how to act normally. Not that **Shiki** had a problem with that. He seemed quite content to lie dormant the majority of the time, while I call him out in times where I needed his particular brand of aggressiveness, such as in sword sparring. Always, he would come to surface, glad to have the chance to be out, but at the same time bored and resigned to his role.

At first it might seem like a relationship between a master and a servant, but the truth was much more complicated. In the end, *Shiki* and Shiki were one person. Whatever *Shiki* did, **Shiki** also desired, and when **Shiki's** desires were suppressed, it was done entirely through his own volition. Which was fortunate, since **Shiki** had what might be called... homicidal tendencies. Now, as far as I knew, he didn't actually commit any murder... maybe. But what's true is that he continually dreamed of the act of murdering his fellow man. *Shiki* expressly forbade it, and tried her best to ignore it. But even as they ignored each other, they would never be separated. Isolated as *Shiki* was from the normalcy of the outside world, she was never lonely, thanks to **Shiki**.

But the time finally came when the cracks in that connection began to show. It was two years ago, *Shiki*'s first year of high school. **Shiki** had never shown any desire to use the body, but it was the first time he had wanted to surface and take control. From then onwards, *Shiki* suffered from gaps in her memory, spaces where she couldn't remember what happened and what she was doing.

As for me, the memories from my freshman year up until the accident are gone. I can only recall fragments, lost without context: me standing in the scene

of a homicide, throat dry, staring at the dark red blood.

One other series of images stands out: The memory of a classroom bathed in sunset, giving it the same vivid red hue that dominates both recollections, the classmate who destroyed *Shiki*, the one Shiki wanted to kill, and the one last piece of an ideal, normal life that Shiki wanted so much to protect. And since waking up from the coma, the name of that classmate has remained out of reach, no matter how hard I try.

The hospital has its own rhythm, its own sort of respiration. The raucous noise of the morning eventually dims slowly into the almost absolute silence of the night. Occasionally, the sound of slippers echoing in the corridor breaks the placidity, and is my only reminder that I am still awake. The black shroud that blinds me now serves only to highlight how alone I am, an entirely foreign sensation that *Shiki* never had. She was never alone.

But now **Shiki** is gone, and his loss is keenly felt. In fact, the only way I know I am me and not him right now is because I can't feel his presence.

“Probably the worst way to know your identity: identifying yourself because of what you lost, because of what you aren’t. “ I take a shot at some good, old-fashioned self-loathing, but it isn’t helping. I wish I was just a little sad. That at least would be a change from the hollow soul that the “doctor” said I had. Like the husk of some old ship, its worth nothing without anything inside it. If so, what goes inside?

*I'd...go inside.*

A whispering, coming from somewhere in the room. I can feel air rush in from the corridor outside, can hear the almost inaudible creak of the door opening. I try to tell myself I’m imagining it, but I turn to the direction of the sound all the same.

A flickering, almost numinous white haze. I shouldn’t be able to see it, but it makes a mockery of that statement. Amidst the complete darkness, it’s the only thing I can see. It stands, vaguely like a human, but without bones to hold it up, in a state of being somewhere in between liquid and gas. It travels towards me, flowing and spreading at the same time in a disgusting motion. I am helpless, unable to move my body, so I can do nothing but wait for it.

At least it has a form I can comprehend. Things without form are the truly frightening things. At least, with a shape, your mind can understand it. I don't sense any hostile intent from this spirit, if that is even what it is. It's even strangely comforting. For how different are we really, this thing that doesn't live, and me who has no reason to live?

The spirit caresses me in the cheek, at which point my entire body freezes, the sensation feeling like someone pouring ice water on my spine. It hurts, but I can't move. I can't even scream. I can only witness it. We stay that way, unmoving, from midnight until the sun starts to come up. At the crack of early morning, I feel it melting away, like a desiccated slug. As soon as I feel the icy grip loosening, I fall into deep sleep.

/ 3

Several days have passed since I first woke from the coma, but the doctors have seen fit to keep my eyes bandaged for now. In a marked shift from the noise which I had come to think was standard hospital policy, this particular morning is so peaceful I lose myself taking in the little motions of the day. I can hear the birds chirping outside my window, feel the daylight shining through it, and I allow my lungs to be filled with the crisp air.

Yes, compared to the world I was in for two years, this world is truly a sight to behold. But with each morning that I wake up to the sprawling life of the world, I think: this world is only as happy as people are alone. The safest way to live is to be alone, but why can't people think that that's enough?

Once, I had a perfect setup. I didn't need anyone else. But the circumstances have conspired to make me wait for the part that I seem to lack, and if current trends are any indication, I might have to wait forever. But what, or who, exactly am I waiting for?

My conversations with the “speech therapist-slash-magician”, such as she was, became a daily affair. In a hospital life full of batteries of tests and therapy sessions, it's become something to look forward to; a welcome respite from the day-to-day banality. Now, as always, our conversation takes a turn back to my past, and as always, she is positioned in the chair by my bed, talking in her own carefree manner.

“Mmm, now I see. So it’s not that **Shiki** couldn’t control the body, just that he showed no desire to do it. You—well, both of you—are proving to be quite the amusing couple.”

She had come suspiciously armed with some very extensive knowledge of my background, some of which I know for a fact only a few people know. She knew the curse behind the Ryōgi dynasty, the most tightly kept secret of the family. She knew of my limited involvement in the serial killing that wracked the city two years ago; details which I would normally be much more secretive about, but I’ve long since resigned myself to the outcome and consequences, though the crime and perpetrator remain ambiguous, even inside my head. I find not having to think about it has made for a less stressful thinking environment.

“There’s nothing amusing about having a dual personality,” I impulsively interject.

She clicks her teeth in disappointment. “A cute label, but not accurate, I’d say. Both of you exist simultaneously, each of you having your own will: a recipe for dissociation. And yet, you both perform the same actions. It’s complicated, and the label ‘dual personality’ doesn’t do it justice. Something like ‘composite independent personality’ seems more fitting.” “Hey, tack on a ‘republic’ in the end there and it’ll sound like some new Balkan country.”

“Ah, well, I never said I was good with names. Still, I do find it weird that, according to you, **Shiki** always slept, even though he didn’t need to.” A matter only I could probably answer. It had always been that way. **Shiki** had always liked to dream, to be off in some astral adventure somewhere in his own imagining, an act that *Shiki* had never shown any interest in.

“So, is he still sleeping now?” she prods playfully, but I find that I can’t answer her. “Then he really is dead, isn’t he? He took your place as the consciousness that died during the accident, and the memories that he took in became lost to oblivion. Explains the gaps in your memories, at least. And without those memories, the knowledge of how involved you were to the serial killing two years ago might be lost forever.”

“So I’m assuming the suspect is still at large?”

“Indeed, but you know how this city plays. We say ‘oh, dear’ at a serial murder

we see on TV, and then go back to eating our dinner. To most of the city in the last two years, it's become some sort of bad joke. The rest have just forgotten." She laughs, leaving in doubt how much of her statement she actually believed. "Shiki still puzzles me, though. If he hadn't done anything, it would have been the *Shiki* consciousness that died. What reason would he have for taking your place like he did?"

"To be honest, it's still something *I'm* thinking about," I say with hesitation. "But enough about him. Did you bring the scissors I asked for?" "Sorry, but Ashika and the rest of his minions didn't allow it. You have, um...well, a history with your eyes, so they're not allowing anything sharp." Well, I can't say I didn't expect anything less. I've been doing pretty well with my physical therapy, and I've even been able to move my body. They said it's the first time they saw someone recover so fast with just two PT sessions every day. As a sort of celebration, I asked for a pair of scissors from the good doctor.

"What were you going to use the scissors for anyway? Flower arrangement on your bedside table?"

"Hell no. I just wanted to cut my hair, that's all." The hair problem has been bothering me ever since I woke up from my coma. It's become quite long in the span of two years. Every time I move my head it keeps tickling my neck and back, and is probably the strongest proof I have of how infuriatingly burdening long hair is.

"You should have just said so, then! It's easy enough for me to call in a hairdresser if you don't want to talk."

"Thanks, but no thanks. Can't stand 'em. I will not be held responsible for what I do when someone other than me does things to my hair." "Oh, I totally know what you mean. We women do have to take care of our hair. You know, I really am jealous of you that your hair growing longer seems to be the only indication that you've aged." I hear the sound of her standing up. "So! Since I couldn't bring you scissors, let me just leave you with another thing. It's not much, but I'm sure it'll be fine. It's a stone with some rune inscriptions on it. Think of it as a protective charm. I'll put it over the door, so it's important that you not let anyone take it off." Now I hear the sound of her dragging the chair to the door, after which she must be using it to put the rune in place. Then, she

opens the door. "Well, guess that's it for now. Someone else might be coming tomorrow, so do be a good girl until then." She departs then, leaving me only with those strange words and the rune.

Night has fallen, and midnight has past, but my usual visitor hasn't revealed himself yet.

Each midnight, without fail, the hazy spirit comes. Tonight proves to be the exception. Each night, as with the first, it had always given me a loving caress, always on the cheek. It was painful, and perhaps even dangerous, but I couldn't care less even if he did choose to eventually kill me. It'd probably be a much simpler affair.

In the dark, I brush the bandages wrapped around my eyes lightly with a finger. It won't be long now until my eyesight recovers. There remains one thing to do before that happens, however: to destroy my eyes; this time, with no room for error.

Without sight, I cannot see them, but it's only a matter of time before they are revealed again. If having sight means to keep seeing those...things that must not be seen, then the choice is obvious. It's much, much more preferable to never see the world than to ever see those things again. Still, maybe there is some other way. It's the last resort until I can find some other means to live.

Man, I *am* pathetic.

The *Shiki* of the past would have destroyed her eyes without a single word or thought to the contrary. I, on the other hand, am hesitating. Not enough will to live, but not enough to die either. If that spirit ever gets it in its head to kill me for some reason, I probably won't cheer it on, but I probably won't raise a hand in defiance either.

## A Hallow - II

For most everyone else in the world during the laid back days of early June of 1998, it was as calm and easy a summer as any other. For Tōko Aozaki, it was the season she would first come to know the intriguing personality known as Shiki Ryōgi. It all began when Tōko had just taken in a new hire, impressed by the boy's ability to track her down despite her preventative efforts. As fate would have it, this new hire apparently had a yarn to spin about his friend, the previously mentioned Shiki, and as a way to pass the time on a particularly lazy afternoon, Tōko decided to listen to him.

Apparently this Shiki was in a coma, brought on after a car accident. She was in a persistent vegetative state, where the chances of waking up are below zero with the decimal numbers going into extreme lengths. It seems that he also heard, from the nurses' gossip at least, that Shiki hadn't aged a day since her coma, a little detail that Tōko had been immediately suspicious of.

"Really now? Even the dead haven't seen the end of entropy yet." she had said, trying to hide the curiosity in her voice. "Sounds a bit like...magic, doesn't it?"

"I don't expect you to believe it, ma'am, but it's true. There's not a spot of the last two years on her. Still, enough about my personal hang-ups. I don't suppose you have any curious coma stories to match mine, do you ma'am?"

He hadn't expected Tōko to take him seriously, but nevertheless, she folded her arms and tried to dig up a story. "Let's see now—there was this story from some far off country where a woman got married then promptly fell into a coma when she was twenty years old. God knows what the reason was, though. Rude

of her, huh? Anyway, her particular case lasted for fifty years. Heard of it?"

"Can't say I have," said the boy, shaking his head. "So what happened to her after she woke up?"

"A surprisingly healthy mental state. Almost like she never even went into a coma! Can you imagine? She started recalling past memories, names; the whole deal. Sad that it didn't do anything to make the husband happy, though."

"What? Why would the husband be sad after her wife recovered?" "Well, it's more the wife's problem, really. Her mind was as fresh as it was before the coma, but her body's taken the atrophy train to seventy year old land. She wanted to run, go exercise, do athletics, but she obviously couldn't, and she couldn't really understand why. The fact that she'd aged fifty years just didn't register as the truth in her mind. The husband on the other hand, felt so bad for the wife that he actually said, with tears coming out of his eyes, that it might have been better for everyone if she hadn't woken up." She said all this as she relaxed in her chair, swinging it from side to side lazily. "How about it, huh? Now *that's* a story I don't expect you to believe. Hope it helped contextualize this entire thing for you."

After Tōko told this story, the boy fell silent, prompting her to speak and prod him into conversation again.

"Oh, but has a bad premonition suddenly crept into the little man's head?" Tōko asks with a playful grin from cheek to cheek decorating her face. The boy nods in assent.

"It's a thought I've never wanted to entertain, actually: the thought that Shiki might not actually want to come back."

"Ah, but what's this?" Tōko suddenly said, putting a hand on her temple and pretending to be a psychic. "I sense a reason behind this. We've got a lot of time to kill, so please, do tell." The boy seemed angered at this approach, and turns away.

"I'd really rather not, ma'am. You know, it wouldn't hurt to be a bit more sensitive to people."

"Hey, you're the one that started talking about her in the first place, friend.

Don't start telling stories if you don't like where they're leading. I'm only asking to pass the time, and because every time Azaka calls me, she always keeps yapping on about this 'Shiki' person. I mean, how on Earth can we women gossip when I don't even know the first thing about the person?"

As soon as Azaka's name is mentioned, the boy frowns in dismay. "I'd been meaning to ask at some point, ma'am, but where and how exactly did you and my sister meet?"

"Long story short, we met when I was on a trip to investigate a little case I was working on. We met, and due to circumstances beyond my control, she ended up finding out about me being a mage."

"Well, whatever. I would ask that you please refrain from pulling her in too much into your world, though," he said, the suspicion clear in his voice. "She's at a very delicate and impressionable age."

Tōko couldn't help but chuckle at that. "You don't know the half of it. I won't butt into your family problems, you have my word. And in exchange for that, let's go back to our previous topic and get me interested in this Shiki person." She lights a cigarette and leaned forward on her desk, the head cradled in her hands positively beaming.

Seeing there was no talking Tōko out of it, the boy could only sigh as he started to tell the story that began two years ago, on the snowy night when he and *Shiki* first met. In high school as classmates, *Shiki* had showed no interest in making nice with the rest of the student body, but it was the boy who struck up a friendship with her. But in the second half of freshman year, around the time the serial killer started making him or herself known, *Shiki* became more aloof and withdrawn, a matter eventually explained when she eventually revealed to him that she suffered a split personality, one of which had a taste for murder. If and how she was connected to the serial killings was never found out. In a rain-soaked night colder than any that had come before, *Shiki* encountered an accident before the boy's very eyes. The boy and the girl were whisked away to a hospital, where she still resides in a coma.

At first, Tōko listened to this story as one would listen to any half-truth told over a beer, but as it progressed, the smile was slowly wiped from her face. At

last, the boy finished relating the story, wearing a solemn expression of that told of how delicate a subject this must have been for him. “So, I guess that’s the long and the short of that particular two-year old story,” he concludes.

“Well, she isn’t some vampire in torpor, I can tell you that. Still, now I might have some idea...” Tōko’s words descended into the particular brand of murmuring she has when she’s pondering the solution to a hard problem. The smile that had disappeared from her face now returns, though this time as a sly curl of the lips. “Remind me again what character you use for her name.”

“It’s ‘*Shiki*’ as in ‘*sūshiki*’, or ‘formula’. Why? Is there anything special about it?”

“Or, alternatively, the ‘*Shiki*’ as in ‘*shikigami*’, that unique Japanese style of goetic theurgy. And on top of that, she’s a member of the Ryōgi dynasty. I’m beginning to see what this is all about, and it stinks of magic.” Unable to contain herself, Tōko extinguished her cigarette on the ashtray and stands up. “The hospital was in the suburbs, wasn’t it? I’ll be back in a few. I just need to go see about this sleeping beauty of ours.”

And without waiting for a reply from the boy, Tōko left her office, along with the boy, unable to think of anything except how exactly she had found herself in such a favorable position. She felt like she could almost feel the subtle rifts and changes in the skeins of fate, shifting to bring her here, at this singular point.

### A Hallow - III

The miracle of Shiki's recovery happened only a scant few days after that. According to the new hire, Shiki's parents had not even been allowed to talk to her for some reason, which meant that visits from him would be decidedly impossible. Because of this, the boy seemed to dive into the paperwork a little more readily, a little more fervently than Tōko had yet seen, perhaps as some means to distract himself.

"It really is far too dark in this office," Tōko mentions, to break the silence they had kept since the start of the day.

"Well, I could get a light for you, if you want, ma'am," he replies, monotone, without sparing even a glance to Tōko. She got the sense that he was thinking of something with the kind of anal diligence that were allowed only to absurd thoughts; half-baked ideas that one leaves to linger in the mind long enough to entertain the notion that they might actually be halfway sane. With this in mind, Tōko finally spoke to him frankly.

"You're free to stop looking so glum about it anytime, you know. Shiki, I mean. And don't even think about sneaking in there at night just to see her."

"I'm not thinking anything of the sort, ma'am. Besides, there're far too many guards around that place: a pair in the front door, and a handful patrolling the grounds."

Mercy me, thinks Tōko, incredulous, *he's already counted the guards and patrol routes. I just took him under my wing, so far be it from me to allow him to be a criminal overnight.* With a shrug of resignation, Tōko spoke. "I was going

to play this one close to the chest, but you're leaving me without much choice here. I've pulled what strings and favors I can to get hired as a temp therapist in the hospital where your friend is. You hear that? I'm going to find out about Shiki Ryōgi for you, so don't you go running off doing something that'll get you arrested. It's the least I could do after hearing you tell that story when you didn't want to in the first place."

She sighed in what might have been an attempt to place a last bit of indifference to the whole situation. The boy, however, stood up, walked towards Tōko, and grasping each of her hands with one of his, he shook them up and down. Not realizing this was his way of expressing his gratitude, she gave him an awkward look, saying, "Right—weird. Gotcha." "This is so surprising, Miss Tōko! I didn't think you'd have it in you to possess the compassion of the average person, ma'am!"

"Now see, you could've taken this in quiet celebration. But instead, you had to go and destroy your chances of ever having a raise."

"Oh, sorry, slip of the tongue," he says quickly, trying to gloss over it as fast as possible. "So that's why you're wearing a fancy suit today. Yes, quite stylish. It looks so good, I almost don't recognize you."

"Um, well I always dress this way, but fine, feel free to keep up the compliments. Lord knows I don't get enough of them." Sensing that the boy would barrel right on through whatever she said, Tōko quickly tried to get back on track. "So, with that business out of the way, I expect you not to do anything as stupid as your age might imply. Something's not right with that hospital, and I'm not sure what, but you don't need to get involved in it. You just stay here and do some crosswords or something while I'm out."

Those last sentences put a damper on the boy's otherwise infectious enthusiasm, and when he finally calmed down, he asked, "What do you mean something's not right?"

"I can feel the resonance of magic there, a ward maybe, put up by a mage other than me. Whoever it is, his or her objective probably isn't Shiki, or they wouldn't have waited so courteously for two years for me to pop into the picture." A lie and Tōko knew it. The machinations of mages were often marked

by their forethought and patience, and there wouldn't have been a reason for any mage to act before Shiki awakened, but now she has. The boy need not know all of that, and fortunately, it seemed that Tōko bluffed it well enough for him to be satisfied.

"Um, ma'am, when you say a 'ward', you mean something like what you've set up on this building, right?"

"You got the gist of it. Wards are nifty little spells centering around controlling a slice of space. Some mages like to conjure up actual physical walls, but others are a bit more subtle, veiling a place to induce a mental urging on anyone that doesn't know or have business with the mage to go away. Best part? People never notice it. To them, it's just some gut feeling that they should stay away. The perfect spell to hide the fact that this place is the sanctum of the best mage this side of Tokyo," she said with a flutter of her hand, the boy reading no irony into what she said. "Of course, you managed to get through and find me and I didn't even know you. But hey, that's why I hired you, didn't I?"

"Then is the ward in the hospital a dangerous spell or something?" "Read between the lines, friend. Wards are rather benign as spells go—by themselves anyway. It's always been used to protect hallowed ground from the prying eyes of the outside world. It originated from Buddhist thought, as far as I know, but now it refers to spells that act as an occultation to the mage, making him or her extremely difficult to find. Good ones don't get noticed. The best ones just go out-and-out creating a small demarcated space that's removed from all normal perceptions of 'space', essentially a small, temporary—yet functioning—pocket universe. But that's some straight up high-level thaumaturgy, done only by archmages; though as far as I know, there's only one such individual in Japan."

Now that Tōko was talking about the Art, a subject she rarely tackled in the presence of the boy, she took on a pointed countenance that looked even more serious than her usual expression. Being a mage was her other job—her real job, if one could even call it that. She continued:

"Still, while it may not have been that extreme, that ward in the hospital is still very well woven, whatever effects it may have. I almost didn't notice it at first. I knew someone once that could have worked something like it, but it really could have been anyone deft enough in that aspect of the Art. I guess it fits their

specialty, but mages who specialize in wards do tend to distance themselves from most outside affairs, so I can't imagine someone like that meddling in this."

*That ward in the hospital wasn't just some cheap spell from an amateur, though, thought Tōko. It was different, pointed inward maybe. Maybe to veil the hospital from any unwanted attention? The mental urging telling those inside to ignore anything abnormal, so someone could operate with free rein?*

Tōko told none of this to the boy. He still needed to be kept out of any unnecessary meddling from things beyond his ken. She mentioned only enough to be polite, and make it clear to him that this was a matter far above him. Tōko took one glance at the wall clock and stood up.

"Well, guess it's about time I showed my face over there," she said, and started to walk towards the door.

"Miss Tōko, please just take care of Shiki for me," the boy says behind her. Without turning to look at him, she gave him a grunt of acknowledgement and waved a hand in goodbye, but a last question from the boy gave her reason to hold her steps for a moment. "Oh, just a trivial question, ma'am, but who was that expert in wards that you knew?"

She dug into her memory for a moment, then looked over her shoulder and answered.

"Oh, just an old friend. A monk. There's really no need to worry about him. The last time we met was on long-past times, in different continents."

It has been six days since Tōko first filled in as a speech therapist for Shiki's case. She had just come back to the office from the hospital, and she was about ready to just sit down and relax until the day ran out. She looked out the window, the setting sun outside baking the walls of her unlit office into a crisp red, forcing her to slacken her orange necktie; a sign of the coming summer heat.

Each evening she returned to the office with an update on Shiki's progress, an act the boy learned to be thankful for.

"She does PT two times a day, and a battery of brain examinations after that, and both leave her pretty spent. You don't need to be troubling her further by going there, so have the patience to wait a little longer and you'll be able to see

her then.”

“Will she be fine with just two physical therapy sessions a day? I mean, she was in a coma for two years after all.”

“I’ve heard that they exercised her joints everyday while she was in a coma. These are trained professionals, friend. Trust them to do their job. Hers is a ‘rehabilitation’ in more than one sense, as she needs to realign herself with society as well. How she recovers physically is only a question of time.” Tōko paused to produce a cigarette, promptly putting it into her mouth and lighting it. Shiki Ryōgi, was, to her, an enigma, a puzzle to relish the formulation of a solution. And every time she talked to Shiki, every time she came back to the office to tell the boy, she found herself pondering the greatest puzzle of all: Shiki’s identity.

“Her mind, however...well, that’s an entirely different story. She’s drifting farther apart from her previous self each day, I suspect.”

“It’s the amnesia, isn’t it?” the boy said hesitantly, but also with conviction, as if he’d been preparing himself for this revelation for the past two years.

“I’m not entirely convinced it is. I don’t see anything wrong with her personality. It’s just that...well, I don’t know how you’ll react to this so—”

“Don’t worry, ma’am. I think you’ve inured me to these things by now. Please, spare no detail on my account. What exactly is wrong with her?”

Ironic, then, that sparing details was exactly what she had been doing in the last few days. But, she thought, perhaps it’s best that he know now. “Her other half that you told me about, the other personality known as **Shiki** she kept inside her, has vanished. She probably can’t even be sure herself whether she’s *Shiki* or **Shiki**. When she awoke, **Shiki** was already gone. And maybe, that’s why her soul now feels empty, like a sinkhole. We mages know better than most the consequences of the soul, and the hollow she feels now is a hell of a burden, inexpressible but keenly felt.”

“But, why did **Shiki** disappear?” he inquired calmly. *All told, he’s taking this quite well*, thought Tōko. *Maybe he really has steeled himself for it.*

“I’m only speculating here, but if you’ll entertain it: Two years ago in that

accident, the girl you know as *Shiki* Ryōgi died. But **Shiki** took her place and died in her stead. ‘Reborn’, such as it was, in her mind was a wholly new individual, molded by her memories and experience but unable to truly feel them. She still probably spends her nights there in her dilemma, unable to grasp the sensation that she is someone that is more than the sum of her parts.”

“If she’s a different individual like you said, does that mean she can’t remember anything that happened before?”

“No, no, she remembers just fine, with the exception of the memories that **Shiki** himself made. She suffered what might be called a ‘death of the mind’. Think of it as her taking a little trip and gaining new experiences. She’s still the *Shiki* you know, but changed somehow by the journey of her soul. I suspect that’s why her growth stopped when she slipped into the coma, as she entered a liminal state of being alive and dead, due to the dual existences of *Shiki* and **Shiki**: a paradox that reality couldn’t resolve. Her memories will be a source of continued anxiety, I assure you, as she will be unable to remember many of what made her dual existence unique, and what she does remember she can’t process as her own. Her personality is one of synthesis, of the past and the present mixed together.”

*I make it sound like it happened involuntarily, Tōko thought, but it probably wasn’t; to compensate for the one she lost, as a way to retain her identity as a Ryōgi, she changes herself. If that’s true, then she’s a fool. She needs companionship, not mimesis, to fill the hollow that Shiki left behind, even if she doesn’t know it yet.*

Tōko let this remain unsaid, and continued. “But even if we hypothesize that she’s a different person, the truth is that she’s still *Shiki* Ryōgi, even if she can’t feel the same way. Time will pass, and with time, her soul’s wounds will heal, and she’ll eventually recognize that fact. A rose by any other name and all that jazz. See, a rose doesn’t change just because you put it on different soil or water it another way. So don’t start slashing your wrists in the bathroom because of it.” She added in a whisper, “In the end, a hole has to be filled with something. For her, the memories won’t do. She needs to make new memories, new experiences; a new hallow for her soul that she herself can create.” Tōko looked squarely at the boy, ensuring there was no mistaking who she was referring to. “And it’s

your job to get her there. You just go do your thing, make contact and conversation. It's the thing she needs the most after she gets out of the hospital, which should be soon."

She chuck the cigarette she had been smoking violently out the window, and then raised her arms to stretch her back, the bones producing a satisfying cracking sound.

"I *really* shouldn't have bought a brand of smokes I don't know. That was a horrible smoke right there," she said to no one in particular. The boy couldn't figure out if the long sigh she made afterwards was caused by her hatred of the cigarette or of the difficulty of her job, and decided that it was perhaps best not to ask.

## / 4

As my usual morning examination comes to its usual boring close, I glance at the desk calendar beside my bed and realize it's the 20th of June. That makes the duration of my stay here a mere seven days, counting tomorrow when I get out of the hospital. With the gradual recovery of my body, they saw fit to finally cut me loose. And that includes the bandages on my eyes, which will come off early tomorrow morning.

It's amazing how little of importance you can gain, and how much you can lose in as short as a week's time. Akitaka and my parents probably haven't changed a bit, but they feel like strangers. But it's me that's changed, and with it, everything. I can only lie here and watch as it happens. I let my hand brush lightly over the bandages covering my eyes. For all that I lost, this is the only thing I gained.

Death: Maybe it's a time and a place. But it's also a concept, formless and shapeless. I lived through it, and now I can literally see it. When I opened my eyes for the first time in two years, the first thing I took notice of wasn't the nurse who rushed to my side in astonishment. It was a line, running across her throat. It only took a moment for me to see the rest: a line in every person, in every wall, even in the air itself, all of them across everything I could see. They were never still, always flowing and slithering in accursed serenity. Then I realized that these weren't just lines. They were cracks and fissures to that oblivion of nothingness I had been in. I was filled with an irrational fear then, a fear of the possibility of that outer darkness pouring into the world I had just returned to. The nurse talked to me, but I couldn't hear the words, only seeing

the lines, and the things they were attached to crumbling and dying, breaking apart piece by piece.

It was that vision that provided the impetus for me to try destroying my eyes. My arms moved, half through my own volition, half through instinctual fear, and every muscle hurt like hell. I was still weak, and because of that the doctor was able to stop me from crushing my own eyes. Jury's still out on whether that was a good thing or not. They never seriously asked me why I did it, chalking it up to the fact that my mind was still recovering, and all sorts of involuntary impulses could happen then.

But now my eyes are almost good again, a fact that I couldn't deny any longer. I'd do anything not to see a world like that a second time. Neither the world I'm in now, or the world of " " in my sleep, a place more disgusting and repulsive than any place I'd ever seen. I still can't bear the thought of ever returning there, though I've since consigned it to a bad dream.

Yet these eyes tied to that oblivion are proof enough of how real it was. I point my fingertips at my eyes. They're only inches away from each other now. All that's left for me to do now is make a fast, clean stab, like I always did in sword practice—

"Hold that thought, friend. Never been told to look before you leap? Whoops, poor choice of words." From the door comes a woman's voice. I turn my head towards it. I didn't have time to remember who she is exactly but whoever she is, I can hear her voice coming closer. I don't seem to hear any accompanying footfalls, however. The person stops right beside my bed.

"Arcane Eyes of Death Perception, huh? Destroying that'd be a huge waste, Shiki. In the first place, even if you destroy it, reality will still make you see what you were meant to see. Curses come home to roost too." "Who the hell are you?" I ask. I hear the sound of her trying to stifle laughter at my angered inquiry, and a rough click, like a lighter spitting out flame.

"A mage. One you'd do well to listen to. Those Eyes are a tool, and like any tool, you need someone to teach you how to use it." As she speaks, I slowly recognize her voice. The tone is altered somewhat, but it is definitely that speech therapist, here for our daily sessions.

“How to use—”

“Damn right. Better than not knowing anything and fucking everything up right? You have eyes capable of manifesting *death*, Arcane power the likes of which the Celtic god Balor held.”

What. The. Hell. I have *absolutely no idea* what this woman is saying. “Arcane Eyes usually only become permanent through a ritual performed on the eyes, but you, you’ve had them ever since, didn’t you? Your little brush with death was just the kind of thing that would have awakened it. From what I hear from reliable sources, it *was always your nature*.”

I know what she’s saying, and my memories say the same thing. *Shiki* was always one to look past appearances, and always read a person’s character, though she never truly intended to do so. I couldn’t possibly begin to speculate as to how she could have known about that, but she continues to talk like she knows every bit about me.

“That was the way *Shiki* rolled, and I suggest you start doing it more often too. Understand that everything has a flaw, a fundamental lie. Then, understand that everything is driven to entropy, to be pulled into chaos and break down. You’ve been brushing that boundary of death for so long that you’ve been able to comprehend it, your eyes allowing you to observe these flaws like a microscope would, seeing lines no one else can see. What you’re seeing is a thing’s death, its end, and you can touch and mold it with your will. Practically speaking, there’s not much difference between you and old Balor now, is there? If you really feel like putting extra fingershaped holes in your Eyes, then you can sell them to me instead, and I’ll happily extract them from you for study.”

“Well, you said I’ll still see them even if I do, so I don’t see why I should hand them ove—“

“Then you do listen to people after all. Then hear this: the mundane life? Ain’t gonna happen. And quit your bitching already. End of the line for your dream. Wake up! Open your eyes to my world, the secret world. You were meant to be here. The happiness of the everyday isn’t for you.” Her declaration carries a confidence that rides with finality, and it’s a sudden and unexpected conclusion that my mind still refuses to accept. “But...I don’t even have the will to live

anymore.” I manage to utter. A weak reply, but it’s all I can bring to fore.

“Oh, let me guess, because your soul is hollow?” she says in a mocking tone. “And yet you don’t want to die. You know why? Because you’ve seen that supernal realm that no third-rate Kabbalist can even begin to conceive of, you ungrateful little brat. Look, I’ll break down your existential crisis for you. You were inseparable once, but now that’s no longer true. **Shiki**’s gone. Big whoop. You’re a different person now. You mutter that you don’t have the will to live while you entertain the thought of not dying. You say you have no reason to be alive, yet you’re scared of death. You’re a regular Neville Chamberlain aren’t you, sitting on that boundary. Is it still a wonder why your soul is so hollow?”

“How dare you even talk about me like you know me! I don’t—” When I finally find the strength to protest, I am cut off again, not by her, but by me... seeing her silhouette through the bandages...as well as the lines she spoke of. Death itself twines around my fingers.

“Guessing you saw the lines again, judging from your reaction. You let your guard down too easily, is why. The stray wraiths in this hospital are happy to have you. You don’t get your shit together soon, they’ll have a comfortable new home in your body.” She must be talking about the white haze. But I haven’t seen it around lately. “Oh, they’re going to get friendly with you. They’re ghosts, you know, parts of the soul fettered to this side, something keeping them from passing on. They aren’t sentient, least not like us, but they’re instinctual things driven to return to corporeality. This hospital has a lot of them. Practitioners of the spiritual Arts usually protect themselves from being possessed when dealing with ghosts, but to someone with as hollow insides such as yours, it’s as easy as stealing a car.”

She says it with such contempt that she almost seems to be enjoying the entire affair. If all of that was true, why did it not possess me in the past? I’d never offered any resistance, after all.

“You’re pathetic, and make a mockery of the rune ward I put extra effort into casting here to protect you. I guess we’re not seeing eye to eye here. All right, you can go do...whatever it is you do from now on for all I care.” After she spits out those words, I hear her stand up and make for the door, but before she closes it to leave, she leaves me one last question. “But are you really going to waste

what **Shiki** sacrificed himself for, *Shiki Ryōgi?*”

As it has become with the questions she liked to bring up about my past, I could not produce an answer, and my evasion only makes me feel like there was something I missed, something I still couldn’t find the reason for.

Night has fallen and darkness has crept into my room. This evening, no footsteps can be heard in the corridor outside, and the silence is kept as dutifully as in a deep mountain. In my head, I keep replaying my conversation with the therapist, specifically her parting words.

*Why did you take Shiki’s place, Shiki?* The question echoes in my head, but **Shiki** isn’t there to answer. *Why did you disappear? What could you have possibly gained in return? You always liked to dream, always liked to sleep, and yet, on that rain-soaked night, you threw that away and died. You’re the me I can never meet, who I never could meet.*

I slowly fall into sleep, racking my mind for a memory, any single scene that could explain why he did what he did. As always, no luck.

The door to my room makes a low creak: someone is opening it. Slow, heavy-set footsteps draw closer. The nurse maybe? No, it’s already past midnight. A visitor? But who could possibly come at this late an—

A hand wraps itself lovingly around my neck, cold to the touch. In an instant, strength enters it, squeezing, choking, and my neck begins to be crushed, little by little.

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With a moment's pressure, Shiki breathes a single moment's pained gasp. She can feel the air in her throat slowly being cut off as the fingers tighten their caress. Shiki can only wryly observe.

*At the rate this guy is going, my neck's gonna be crushed before I have the air wrung out of me.*

Though unable to see, Shiki attempts to offer her attacker a solid look directly to the face, so close that she can smell the scent of...it. Whatever this thing is, it isn't something that is still alive, judging by the smell. Shiki can feel it now, the corpse looming above her, its grip not slackening for even a second. She grasps both arms, attempting to ward them off, but to no avail—the difference in strength was clear.

But wait, thinks Shiki, *isn't this what I'd wanted all along?*

She stops resisting, and halts her breathing. If I'm going to choose to die, might as well make it as fast as humanly possible. After all, *existing without really "living" is the worst thing you can do to anyone. It's only right for me to disappear.*

Her strength ebbs as she surrenders herself. Though only a few seconds have passed, to Shiki, time seems to be stretching itself out painfully. Cold, wooden hands dig into her skin. The flesh tears, and warm blood seeps forth as proof of life.

*I'm going to die, just like Shiki.*

*And I'm just going to throw that life away, like trash.*

The thought makes Shiki pause.

*Did Shiki really want to die? I never thought about that. Of course he never wanted to die! But—he had to. To protect something. And he wouldn't have wanted me to die too. After all, death is such a lonely, fruitless thing; dark, ominous, and more worthy of fear than anything else.*

“No!” Shiki manages to cough. In a moment, she resumes her resistance, grabbing hold of both arms as before, and puts a foot on her attacker’s belly. “Anything but to fall into that place again!”

And with all the strength she could manage on that one leg, she kicks the corpse upwards and away. The blood and skin on Shiki’s throat make a wet sound as the hands that held her slip away. Immediately, she stands up and gets herself away from the bed as fast as her feet could carry her, but the corpse is close behind. Its hands struggle in the unlit room, trying to find solid purchase on Shiki’s body as he tries to grapple her again.

From what Shiki can tell, the corpse’s body is that of an adult man, two heads higher than her. She fumbles as best as her blindness can allow, but she is hard pressed to resist, her hands being as busy trying to feel herself around the room as warding off the corpse’s attacks. She retreats, and retreats once more, until she leads herself back-first into a wall.

The light bump on her back reassures her: it is a hard rap on the glass window. The corpse approaches, and Shiki hears the sound of its arms cutting through the air, which Shiki manages to intercept with her own, stopping them at least for a while. With the window at her back and the corpse in place, all was according to her hastily thought up plan. There is one last consideration that gives her a moment’s hesitation—what floor is this on?

“Don’t hesitate!” she tells herself, and releases the arms of the corpse as hard as she could manage. Immediately, they gun for her throat again, but Shiki is faster. Using her now free hands, she opens the window. With the force of the corpse’s grapple and approach, they both fall out of the window, entangled with each other.

In an instant, me and the corpse are out of the window and in open air. In the next instant, I grab it by the shoulder and force it downwards, reversing our positions. With him below me to soften my fall, we descend together. A second or two later, it hits the ground, and I feel the force of the impact sharply but without lasting pain. I jump away from it, the hands and feet that support my landing scattering some dirt in the hospital's yard.

Judging from the sound of foliage just before the fall, the corpse had fallen on some sort of flower bed a meter or so away.

That was an amazing landing, if I do say so myself. So amazing in fact, that my body is frozen in place, likely still catching up at having just fallen three floors. The smell on the wind is that of fresh leaves and trees in the courtyard. In contrast to the excitement of the last few seconds, the night is deathly silent. Unmoving, I feel only the throbbing pain in my throat. It tells me that I'm still alive.

As for the corpse...well, whatever it is, it isn't done yet. If I don't want to die, then I know what I need to do.

Kill. Before it kills me.

With that thought, the cavernous emptiness that had until moments ago gripped my heart fades away. All my doubts, all my worries, disappear all at once.

“That’s all?” I whisper. It’s only then that I awaken, for real this time. How stupid and foolish I was, to brood as I did, when all along the answer was so fine and simple.

“Catty in more than one sense, aren’t we?” says a voice from behind Shiki, a voice she recognizes as the therapist’s. Shiki does not turn to meet her, still shocked from the fall.

“You again? Kind of late for therapy, don’t you think?” Shiki asks.

“I’ll have you know I was standing guard,” answered the self-styled mage nonchalantly. “It all had to come to a head tonight, before you got out, one way or the other. These ghosts wanted your body but couldn’t get it, so they possess a dead body to take care of that problem.”

“Please don’t tell me this is all because of that weird stone you left in the

room.”

“Oh ho, so she remembers. No, it’s not the rune’s fault, but I will admit this is a mistake I did not foresee. I erected a ward that should have kept ghosts out, but then they get themselves a corporeal body to circumvent that. They usually aren’t that smart, neither with the body, or their dogged determination to have you specifically. I smell strings behind this.” The mage chuckles, as if this was all some grand game she was playing with another of her kind, and she had just made a small tactical mistake.

“Well, now’s your chance to rectify that. Why not show me some of the magic up your sleeve, mage?”

“Don’t mind if I do.” With that, the mage snaps a finger. In the air, her hand moves as if to conduct a mudra, manipulating the cigarette she holds to describe a symbol made out of straight lines in the air, which finds itself suddenly projected onto the still-staggered corpse. It is rune script, her conduit to arcane power, and through it she sets fire to the rotting body, putting flame to it from afar. “The Ansuz I have is too weak for this,” she grumbles, seemingly disappointed. The reason soon becomes clear.

The flames embrace the corpse, but it only starts to stand up, unmindful of its current state. The bones on its leg are clearly broken, and yet once it stands it continues to advance, shuffling and dragging itself towards Shiki. It is not long before the flames extinguish themselves, the power animating it expiring.

“Are you telling me he’s still standing? Are you a real mage or are we in the part where you try selling me bridges?”

“I think I preferred you more docile. This is difficult, and definitely not my area of expertise. If it was a regular human, bam, end of story. But since it’s a corpse, it doesn’t really mind if it loses an arm or a head. You’d need an incinerator to stop him, or maybe a particularly devout monk could—” “Let’s make this quick, shall we? Long story short, you can’t do it.” The mage shoots Shiki an annoyed glance at what she just said, her pride forced to submit to her inability.

“Don’t think your newfound talents are going to save you from that thing for long, too. It’s already dead. While you can kill people, you’re a long way away

from unmaking the death-touched. We'll fall back for now." The mage retreats a step. Shiki, however, remains unmoving, though not through any injury from the fall. She is only smiling, as if this ridicule in itself was enough to stop the approaching enemy.

"Dead or whatever you wanna call it, that body is moving, still 'living', right? Then—" Shiki finally lifts herself up, standing now with back bent in the manner of some ancient predator. She puts a finger to her neck, feels the texture of her torn skin, and of the life blood flowing out of it, the traces of strangulation still left. *And yet, here I stand, alive.* The sensation of it is almost orgasmic. "—whatever it is, I'll kill it," she finishes.

The bandages that blinded Shiki come loose and drift away on the wind, at last revealing in the midst of the black night her spellbound Eyes. In an instant, she puts energy into her legs, breaking into a run, every kick of her legs scattering the soil beneath her feet.

She sees everything now. She sees the corpse and how it raises a hand to strike her as she approaches. Shiki is only barely able to duck under it. Most especially now, she sees the lines, no longer as threatening as before, but inviting, throbbing and pulsating to an invisible rhythm. She sees the lines on the corpse, and with one hand traces one of their number, stretching from right shoulder to left hip. Though her hand seems to slip easily into the line, the attack costs her a broken finger, a minor inconvenience compared to the injury dealt to Shiki's enemy, who is now cut in half.

Like a puppet being cut from its strings, the thing collapses in a heap, its one arm the only part of it still able to move, grasping Shiki's leg like a writhing insect. Without mercy, Shiki quickly stomps on it with her foot.

"What a useless piece of death you are," she spits out, more indignant than she has ever been. "Begone from my sight!" She laughs a silent laugh and thinks, *I'm alive! All that worry and trouble, gone like bad lies, and the only truth is that I live.*

"Shiki!" calls out the mage from the distance. She throws a thin, silvery object at the ground near Shiki, and before it lands it catches a glint of the moonlight. A knife, plain and unadorned. She retrieves it from the ground and sets about its

first task. She looks down at the persistent half-body clinging to her for a moment before bringing the knife down on its throat. The corpse stops moving almost instantly, but the mage calls out again. “You idiot! Stab it right in the heart!” But it is already too late. Faster than her rebuke comes the white haze that Shiki once knew, floating back into ethereal existence the moment Shiki brought down the knife. At once, it beats a hasty retreat...not away, but into Shiki’s body. She falls to her knees as if in a trance. In the moment that Shiki lost herself to the ecstasy of murder, it is then that they make their move to possess her, when the sense of self is weakened.

The mage draws closer to Shiki. “She didn’t finish it, the damned fool.” It seems, however, that Shiki still maintains some tenuous control, as she holds out an outstretched arm towards the mage. *Don’t come closer*, it seems to say, and the mage finds herself complying. Now with both hands, Shiki grasps the knife, fingers clinging to it like the symbol of life itself, and positions it point-downwards above her own chest.

Determination returns to her hollow eyes. Her lips are still as she grits her teeth and brings the knife slowly downwards until the tip touches lightly upon the skin of her breast. She tells herself in her mind that neither her body nor the hallow of her soul have not yet been plundered by any foolish ghost.

“Now there’s nowhere for you to run,” she speaks to no one but herself. Shiki directs the spellbound sight of her Arcane Eyes inward to see the death of the spectral thing that plagued her, willing and weaving her magic to kill it and only it. Believing only that she won’t be injured from what she was about to do, she gathers her strength.

“I’ll kill the weak part of me. And you will never have Shiki Ryōgi ever again.”

She presses the knife downwards, the blade sliding smoothly through flesh.

The few seconds that pass before she moves again carry the air of a ritual, and when she does move, she withdraws the knife from her chest. No blood runs from her breast, nor are there any traces of it on the blade. But she feels the phantom pain of that knife all the same. She takes a swing at the air, violently, as if to remove the invisible taint of the spirits on the blade, and then speaks to the

mage.

“I remember what you said. You said that you’d teach me how to use these Eyes.” Her voice, once so quivering and unsure, now settles into a confidence. The mage, seemingly satisfied, nods her assent.

“Make no mistake, friend. This is a transaction. You’ll learn to focus your talent, but in return you’ll help me with my work. I recently lost my familiar, so I need another pair of helping hands.”

“Right,” Shiki says without even turning to look at her benefactor. “Does that mean I get to kill people?” The question makes even the mage shiver in spite of herself, but she tries to remove her reservation in her answer. “Obviously.”

“Then you have me. Do whatever you want with me. After all, it’s not as if I have any direction in my life.” And with that, she falls unconscious, tired from the fighting, and from the pain on her chest, a look of melancholy on her face just before she collapsed.

The mage lifts her up in her arms, staring for a long time at Shiki’s sleeping face. In contrast to her countenance only moments ago, her face is now tranquil, enough to create the illusion that no life ever flowed through those cheeks. Before long, the mage offers her own words, not caring whether Shiki hears her or not.

“No direction, huh? Unfortunately, you’re wrong again.” She begins to detest the peace on Shiki’s face. “Because a hollowed soul means you can put as much as you can back into it. Where else can you find better prospects, you lucky bastard?”

She clicks her tongue in annoyance, for these are words that she thought she’d forgotten how to say.

## Chapter 10

Slowly, slowly, I slip into dream. But even in dream the question remains: The man known as **Shiki** no longer exists, but what did he gain, and what did he hope to protect, by disappearing as he did? In dream, *Shiki Ryōgi*'s memories provide the answer like a parting gift.

He died to protect a shared dream, a dream of finally finding his—our—own slice of peace. And he thought we had found it. He believed in him, in that boy.

He died for me, and for that boy, and he left me with this deep, abiding, loneliness.

Warm sunshine forces open my eyelids, and I remember now that my Eyes are no longer covered, no longer blind. It feels like I'm lying down on the bed. That mage must have put me back in my room when I fell unconscious last night, set things back to right.

Completely still, I absorb as much of the morning atmosphere as I can manage, taking in the warm yet fleeting sunlight, as if to let it wash out the darkness that possessed me last night. I feel the languor of the morning, feel it melding the dreams of my twin existence to create one fleeting life. I want so much to cry for **Shiki**, but I've decided to cry only once from now on. He represents something I'll never be able to return to, and this isn't the time and place for tears, and so my eyes are dry.

Besides, he would have wanted to disappear without anyone crying anyway.

“Morning, Shiki.”

I hear a voice coming from beside my bed, and when I turn my head to look toward it, there sits a familiar friend, his appearance unchanged even in the face of two years. The black, unadorned hair he keeps, and the similarly black-rimmed glasses: both are exactly as they were, as if he stepped out of past and into present.

“Do you...still know who I am?” he asks with marked hesitation. He didn’t need to.

Yeah, I know. You’re the one that waited, the only one that cared enough to watch over me.

“Mikiya Kokutō, right?” I respond, almost in a whisper. “Last name still sounds like some French poet to my ears.” He smiles as broadly as the day we met the second time in school. I wonder, though, if he still remembers the promise we made.

“Nice day out today. Perfect weather for getting out of the hospital, don’t you think?” Faintly, I can see the tears behind his eyes that he is so desperately trying to hold back and sound as natural as he can. It’s a touching sentiment. He chose to smile rather than to cry.

Just like Shiki chose to recognize solitude instead of becoming solitary. Though I still don’t know which of the two I should side for.

“Guess there are still things I didn’t lose,” I mutter as I look at him contentedly, the sunlight streaming in through the window behind him half-obscuring his smile. I know that such gestures aren’t enough to heal my empty heart, but still...

It was still the same smile I remember, unchanged neither by time or flawed memory.

## **Boundary Goetia**

In a room that had seen no alteration in years, in days locked in stasis, a girl shivered while she lay on top of her bed. The door had not admitted a visitor in quite some time, but today it opened for one such a man. Steps echoed in the room, there one moment, and gone the next, choosing when and if they made a sound. It was him, no doubt about it.

He stood high, with a cruel body and constantly clouded eyes that bore the weight of an eternity's reckoning. Those grim eyes only looked at her, but still she felt the dread that passes through a prisoner when she sees her warden. The room felt emptier with him in it, and even the girl, who longed for death, had to acknowledge the deathly fear that shook her.

“You are Kirie Fujō, are you not?” His voice was ice, flowing and crashing. Though blind, Kirie Fujō attempted to look towards her visitor and ask back.

“Are you that friend of my father’s?” The man did not speak, but Kirie knew the answer all the same. This was the man who had paid for her stay here in the hospital, when Kirie’s family had all died. “What brings you here? You know I can’t do anything for you.” She tried to hold back her trembling as she spoke.

The man remained motionless, but spoke. “I have come to grant your wish. Do you desire another body, free of this prison?” Kirie heard some harmony of magic in his impossible statement, and she thought that even that absurdity could be made possible.

After a beat of silence, the girl nods her assent, throat trembling, and the man lowers his head and raises his right hand in answer. And it was here he granted

her a dream and a waking nightmare. But before this moment, she put to him a question.

“What—who are you?”

He answered—

She left the abandoned underground bar behind her and started on her way. Each step was heavy, and each ragged breath brought her closer to collapse. As she progressed, she had to lean on street light posts and the walls of buildings to stop herself from falling over.

Earlier, in the bar, she had been struck in the back with a bat by one among the five that violated her with regularity. She felt no pain. Only a dull heaviness from the thought of being struck. She held a pained expression, not out of anguish but by the expectation of anguish that she thought should be present. She had planned to endure the regular humiliation and go home to her dormitory in silence. But tonight, with her mind and body sluggish and unresponsive, the way home seemed to stretch on interminably.

She passes the display window of a shop in the commercial end of town and sees how pale she has become in her reflection. Without a sense of pain, she only knows that she's been hit in the back, and that the injury is bad. She has no idea to what extent. She walks on, not knowing her backbone has already endured a crack.

The hospital is out of the question. Even if she went to the doctor that her parents didn't know, he'd still ask questions, and that would blow the whole thing open. She was never good at lies. Besides, the distance to his clinic was much too far.

“What should I do?” Desperation evident in her whisper. Too tired to go further, she starts to fall towards the sidewalk—

—until a man's arm stopped her fall.

Astonished, she looked upwards, seeing a man with hard set eyes. He asked her:

“You are Fujino Asagami, are you not?” His was a voice that brooked no refusal. It was the first time that the girl, Fujino Asagami, felt such a fear as to

freeze her in place. “Your spine must be healed, otherwise you cannot move freely.” His words spoke of improbabilities, and yet brought home with clarity the reality of Fujino’s situation.

She wants it. She wants to go back to her dormitory, the only place where she had ever found peace. Her eyes are clouded with meek desperation, and they meet the man’s own. He wore a long coat despite the summer heat, and its features were a solid black. His anachronistic cloak and rigid gaze somehow brought to Fujino’s mind the image of a monk.

“Do you wish me to heal you?” he finally asks, but he phrases it more like a demand than an inquiry. Fujino didn’t even notice herself nod in assent. “Then let it be so. Your body’s defect I do now scatter.”

And it was here that his face was ever still as his right hand touched Fujino’s back lightly. But before this moment, she put to him a question.

“Who are you?”

He answered—

But before this moment, he put to him a question.

“Who...who the hell are you, man?”

The man in the black cloak remained motionless as he answered. His voice seemed then to be powered by some demiurgic force, and through him that force spoke, resounding through the alleyway with the whispering of ages.

“A mage. My name is Sōren Alaya.”





5  
矛盾螺旋·上

# *Paradox Spiral*

Paradox Paradigm.

Back when I was a kid, I used to hold on to this little piece of metal all the time. It was an ugly little thing, with these dull, jagged teeth that started to dig into your skin if you held it tight enough. A lot of times, it felt like holding all the loneliness of a cold December day. Still, I loved that little thing.

I loved the way it made a click every time you turned it around, a chime for each day's beginning and another for its end. The sound made me so proud every time I heard it, but it was also twinned with something strangely melancholic.

But in time, I soon found those spiraling days coming to a close. The only thing that remained is the silver glint of the metal, and the chill of its surface. There was no joy when I held it now, only blood that sometimes oozes when I grip it too tight. There wasn't any sadness either. Maybe there never had been. It's just a simple scrap of metal, nothing more. And when I grew older still, even the glint of it—which once seemed so magical—disappeared.

It was then that it finally hit me: growing up is throwing away fantasy for the cunning of survival. And for realizing that, I praised myself for my own cleverness.

## Prologue

This is the year when autumn went as fast as it came.

Having just entered the departing days of November, and with winter already well underway, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department found another strange tale adrift on its shores. To be fair, ghost stories and the like were never out of season for the Crime Investigation Section, a trait it lovingly shares with hospitals all over the city. It's practically a year-round campfire, huddling together in a dark corner of the human experiment to share what new stories the city decided to churn out the murder mill.

Which is probably why when Detective Akimi, who is as natural a police as they come, actually gets interested in a case of his own accord, it is a case of some deserved curiosity. Akimi built his career on stone whodunits, a man who loved the mystery. Combine this with him hearing gossip about a very peculiar report, and you have him phoning the relevant stations for the very same report in no time at all.

So far however, reading the plainly written report held little for him. It told a story of a bizarrely failed burglary that took place in some residential high-rise a small ways away from downtown in early October. The perp was a joe with a previous record, an all too common caper: burgle the apartments of people who'd just left it unlocked. Simple, old, but still effective. The day of the incident, he stole into just such an apartment after staking the place out and waiting for someone to leave, which was probably the extent of his planning.

What came after was what made this report interesting. Apparently, the same

guy came running to the nearest police station yelling for help. The on-duty officers eventually got a story out of his hysteria: that he saw the dead bodies of the family that lived in the apartment he broke into. An officer escorted him back to the apartment immediately, only to find that the family he spoke of was indeed there. On the other hand, they weren't dead. Instead, they were in quite good health and in fact enjoying a family dinner. This understandably disturbed the burglar, though the officer really cared only about the fact that the man had exposed himself to breaking and entering, and thus, took him into custody.

Leaning back on his squeaky pipe chair, Detective Akimi offers an incredulous "What the fuck?" at the air, directed at no one. The suspect tested negative for alcohol or drugs, and didn't suffer from any glaring mental health problems. Certainly a strange and curious report, but otherwise, there didn't seem to be a case here, if it was worthy of even being called one. Hardly a case to stand beside the current investigation that's got half the section in a rustle: four missing one after another, with no clue as to their whereabouts, and four families that they needed to shut up while they worked the case from an angle that benefitted from their silence. Much like the serial killings three years ago, it's resulted in many a sleepless night for him, and he certainly didn't need this case to add more.

Still, he could feel the hairs on his back rise when he read the report, a feeling that he'd learned to trust as the instinct that something was there, waiting to be discovered; maybe even a report that could be turned into a case with legs to spit shine the clearance rate.

"Worth a call, at least," Akimi says as he picks up the receiver on his desk phone and puts it to his ear. He dials the number of the station where the report came from. Before long, an on-duty officer answers and Akimi starts to inquire for details on the report. Did they check with the other tenants for anything out of place? Did they find any inconsistency with the suspect's description of the family? But it becomes fruitless as the answers fit his expectations, that they had indeed asked the neighbors, and no there was nothing out of place, and that the description of the perp was spot-on except with regards to the family's state of being. With quick thanks, Akimi puts the receiver back.

At that instant, a voice calls him from behind. “What are you on the phone for, Daisuke? You need to get rolling. The second guy’s body’s just been found, and you’re the primary on the case.”

“Fuck it, another one? Don’t tell me it’s another partially eaten body.” Akimi’s friend only responds with a curt nod, which is his cue to drop his curiosity and get out of here. No one’s going to care about the report, but it was all tumbleweeds when he read it anyway. And nothing takes priority over this new serial murder case. With that, the report goes back into file in a cabinet somewhere to be forgotten, even by Detective Akimi, the CIS’s lover of mysteries.

## **Paradox Spiral - I**

In the first few days of October, the streets already blow over with the bitter cold.

Winds with fingers of ice grant gentle caresses to the lamp posts and dumpsters. Usually, the city still looked alive at this hour, at 10 o' clock in the evening. But tonight is different. Tonight, scattered pools of light in the streets, from display stores to the street lamps, only serve to accentuate the little shadows and silhouettes playing across them. Winter is coming early this year, and considering the temperature, it wouldn't be at all out of place to discover snow falling tonight. The silhouettes of people exiting the train station, jackets worn and collars fluttering in the wind, lack all the life they normally have. Like automatons, they walk at brisk paces to their homes, not stopping for a look at a display window or a warm cup of coffee. They hurry because they all want the warmth and familiarity of their homes.

From the wave of people, to the heat that refuses to gather, and even the shops whose lights seem just a little bit dimmer; the boy witnesses all of it. He sits beside a vending machine situated in a little nook beside the avenue, idly watching the people exiting the train station. Almost as if to hide himself, he sits hugging his legs to his chest, and he cuts a pitifully thin figure that makes it hard to determine his gender from afar. His hair, arranged like a bundle of unkempt straw, is dyed red. He looks to be around the age of sixteen or seventeen. His eyes are narrowed, yet they don't seem to be particularly interested in anything. He shivers under strange clothes: dirty jeans and a blue jacket one or two sizes too big for him, with nothing else to cover his top. It isn't surprising to see him

with teeth chattering.

He sits there for a long time, and just when the number of people exiting the station begins to thin noticeably, he finds himself surrounded by a number of other people.

“Yo, Tomoe,” says one of them, not even attempting to hide the scorn in it. The red-haired boy doesn’t respond.

“Ah c’mon, Enjō, don’t be a dick and ignore us,” he persists. Lifting the boy by his jacket, he forces the boy from the ground. The boy saw all of them now, five people surrounding him, stand at almost the same height as he does, and it is easy to tell their ages are not so far apart. “What, just ‘cuz you stopped going to school, we strangers now?” The same person continues. “Oh, now I get it. Our little Tomoe is a fucking grown up now, so he don’t talk to kids like us anymore, eh?”

The rest of his companions all snicker in response. But when the noise dies down, Tomoe continues to ignore them. Frustrated, the boy holding Tomoe by the jacket lets it go with a grunt, only to bring his hand back up in a fist, punching Tomoe in the face. He collapses back to the ground, and he hears a distinct clinking sound of something metallic falling out of his pocket.

“Hey, don’t even think about sleepin’, man.” More laughter. Hearing that clinking sound seems to jolt Tomoe Enjō from whatever state of shock he had been suffering up to now. He whispers his own name, like some sort of resuscitative ritual, remembering who he was, why he was here. With senses regained, he looks at the boys surrounding him, finally remembering them as his classmates, former “friends.” Normal students who played at being adult.

*Preying on weak people like me,* Tomoe thinks.

“Aikawa, right?” says Tomoe. “Hell you doing here at this hour?” “Right back at you, man. We all been worried you be suckin’ dick behind the restaurants just to get by. I mean, seeing as you’re such a girl. Am I right?” He gestures and looks over his shoulder toward his compatriots. Because of his overly thin build, Tomoe has been called a girl in school for as long as he can remember. He never paid any heed to it, and that is largely how he reacts now. However, he does pick up the empty aluminum can he had been drinking from some minutes ago.

“Hey, Aikawa,” Tomoe calls. Aikawa returns his attention to him. “Wha—”

As soon as Tomoe sees that pimple-ridden face turn towards him, mouth half open to speak, he thrusts the can violently into it, twisting the can as deeply as he can inside Aikawa’s mouth. He quickly follows it up by slapping the can as hard as he can muster. Now it is Aikawa’s turn to collapse. Tomoe’s slap partially crushed the can, causing the surface to bend sharply in places, and when Aikawa coughs it up on the ground, both the can and his mouth are dripping with blood.

Aikawa’s companions are dumbstruck. They thought they would just mess with their former classmate, maybe even take some of his money. It never occurred to them that it would turn to violence.

“Still shit for brains, I see,” Tomoe remarks wryly. Then he kicks him sharply and repeatedly in the head, almost like he wants to kill him, a stark contrast to his seemingly uninterested demeanor earlier. Aikawa doesn’t move an inch, though whether it’s because he’s unconscious or his neck is broken, Tomoe doesn’t know. After a few quick kicks, Tomoe makes a break for it, before Aikawa or his cronies can come to their senses. Thinking the crowd will just slow him down, Tomoe turns instead towards one of the side alleys where he can make good his escape in the sharp, confusing turns. It’s only a second or two after he starts running that the group he left behind start to process what just happened before them. He hears their angry calls as they start after him.

“Asshole thinks he can just do this to us? Let’s kill that son of a bitch!” says a voice echoing in the alleyways, whipping his companions into a frenzy. Through the capillaries of the city, they chase Tomoe like live game, baying for blood.

“Kill that son of a bitch.”

I let the words bounce around in my head, and I laugh heartily to myself. I heard the verve in their voice, heard how serious they were, and they would probably follow through on it when they catch up to me. But they’re faking it, as much as anyone else who says it jokingly. They don’t know what happens to you after you do it for the first time. They don’t know what killing someone does to a person. But see, I do.

I killed someone, just before I went to the train station. I remember gripping

the knife, and feeling the tenderness each time I stabbed. Just thinking back on it makes me shiver and want to throw up. My teeth start to chatter again, and my mind recoils on the memory with the force of a hurricane. Those guys don't understand how far it removes you, and that's why they can say they'll "kill" as if they're just going for a little walk.

Guess I'll be the one to teach them, then. I focus my mind and allow my laughter to recede into a little smile. I don't consider myself a particularly violent guy. I believe in an eye for an eye, but tonight's the first time I've ever busted someone up who just hit me. Disproportional response. It ain't like me, but I did it. Maybe because I actually liked the feeling of not holding back.

I come to a narrow alley sandwiched between two buildings, far from the main road and any curious eyes or ears. I stop here, right at the corner, thinking it a prime spot for the act. Before long, they catch up, and things happen in snapshots of time. One of them, ahead of the others, rounds the corner of the alley, and I take a fraction of a second to confirm it's who I want it to be before I spring on him. The palm of my left hand shoots up to connect with his jaw. I think fast. In an amateur fistfight, it often comes down to endurance in an exchange of blows. I know I don't have a hair's breadth of a chance winning like that, especially outnumbered, so if I'm going to do this, I do it to kill them one by one, without hesitation, before I'm surrounded.

The guy I just hit tries to return the favor, but before that happens, I thrust a finger into his left eye. It feels kind of like slightly hard jell-o when I twist my finger around.

His scream is enough to send a chill down anyone's spine. Before he has time to regain their composure, though, I grab the guy's head and, putting my whole body behind it, finish him off by slamming the head into the wall. A dull thud as it makes impact with the concrete, and when I let go of him, his body slides against the wall towards the ground, the back of his head leaving a lazy blood trail on the wall and his left eye a dripping, bloody mess. Still, he's probably not dead from just that. I pull my eyes away from him to meet the other four still coming, and if I'm lucky, they'll be just that little bit hesitant after they heard their friend screaming his guts out.

When the rest of them turn the corner, they are immediately taken aback at the

sight of their friend. Just as I thought, they are unprepared. They've probably seen their share of accidentally spilled blood in street fights, but they've never seen a body that looks like it's bleeding its life out on the asphalt. Wasting no time, I attack the nearest guy, slapping him, and then grabbing him by the hair. I lower his head fast, then bring my knee up to his kindly waiting face. A low crunching sound tells me that I may have broken his nose. I give him three more kneeings for good measure, then bring my elbow down at his skull. The impact is a painful shockwave traversing my arm for a brief moment.

Two down. My knee is a dark red, soaked in the second man's blood. "Enjō, you motherfucker!"

That last one finally pushes the rest of them over the edge. Without any sense of reason or forethought, they jump into the brawl all at the same time. That's when I know I'm done. I can't take on three guys at the same time, and they prove me right.

They lash out punches and kicks, pushing me back against the same wall I slammed their friend against not moments ago until they force me to the ground. I feel the knuckles digging into my cheeks, and I reel from every kick that lands on my stomach. Nevertheless, they're not fighting the same way I did earlier. No ferocity. They're not gonna kill me. They don't want to. And yet, if they keep this up, they *will* eventually kill me. They won't know that they'll break bones, cause internal bleeding, and make it more difficult for me to breathe. The fact that my death will be a slow slide into nothingness instead of a quick and easy one grants me a measure of anguish.

See? Even if they don't mean to, people still end up killing other people.

As the hits continue to land on my body, I wonder: Between people like me who truly seek to kill, and people like them who will just commit an unintentional homicide, who carries it heavier in the end?

My body is already covered in bruises, but the pain is becoming routine, almost welcoming now. I'm sure that bunch are getting really into it in their own way, too. It won't be long before they start to enjoy it, and they won't be able to stop themselves.

"Now don't we look cute with that face, Enjō?" says one of them. He thrusts

his foot keenly into my chest, and my violent coughing immediately afterwards leaves the taste of blood in my mouth. I'm down for the count, and I realize I have maybe a precious few seconds before they completely beat the life out of me, the same life that I never valued as anything above expendable. A fist hits my eye, and half my vision goes dark. At that moment, I hear a faint sound. Then a beat of silence. Another beat. They don't seem to be moving.

The noise resounds again like a bell: the singular, clacking tone of wood. With pained eyes I see the three guys, heads already turned towards the sound emanating from the alley's entrance. I train my vision to the same direction even as the swelling in my eyes grow more painful as I move them. My mind stops.

Silhouetted against the mouth of the alley is a person who clearly doesn't belong here. The clacking sound we'd all heard earlier comes from the person's wooden geta footwear; the dark finish, red strap, and oval shape clear even from this distance. A woman's *geta*. The clothing on the figure is peculiar to say the least: a red leather jacket atop a dead plain orange kimono.

The shadow advances, each step like a reverberating wooden bell. The person's movement is a hypnotic sway of clothes and carelessly cut inkblack hair that invite surrender, and I almost forget myself. Wraithlike white skin, and eyes of clear void. Surely not the usual everyday sight in a backlane filled with scattered bottle shards and discarded syringes.

A woman...a girl. I almost can't tell her gender, but somehow, I know she's a girl.

"Hey," she calls out, continuing to venture deeper into the alley and closer to us. The three who had surrounded me now break off to meet her. It's painfully obvious what they're planning on doing to the girl.

"Ain't nothing for you here, lady." The trio flex their fingers for a new round of violence, the excitement in their gait barely contained. They move to surround the lone girl. Unable to move more than an inch, and with my speech coming out as strained gasps of air, I can do nothing except to curse them in my mind. I chose this place so as not to involve anyone else, and yet here she is in defiance of all probability. And now, no doubt only because she chose to turn the wrong alley for a shortcut home, she'll be a victim as well.

“I ain’t playing, girl!” one of the three shouts. “Don’t you got ears to hear what I just said?”

The girl is silent again now, but in a flash, she extends a hand, using it to grab the arm of one of the approaching boys. She pulls. Her posture changes subtly to one that puts her entire weight behind the action, and her purchase on the boy’s arm then forces him to the ground in one violent motion. Watching it from where I lie, the entire thing seemed to go frameby-frame, as if I was turning the handcrank on an old viewing machine.

The remaining two attempt to close in on the girl, and she immediately strikes the closest one in the chest with her palm, causing him to crumple like a ragdoll to the ground, unconscious. It amazes me that she knocks them out of commission with such ease, all in the space of about five or so seconds, while I exerted so much effort to take out an equal number of people. The last one must have realized this fact as well, since as soon as the second man is down he starts to turn on his heels and run screaming. She soon ends that with a swift roundhouse kick delivered straight to the guy’s head, with barely the noise of rustling clothes to its credit. Like the previous two, he is rendered unconscious.

“Ouch. Literally hard head on that last one,” she grumbles as she fixes the creases on her kimono. I keep my eyes fixed on her, wondering if she’s even going to talk to me. It’s strange but not altogether uncomfotting that I can still slightly distinguish her form in this isolated place, even in the absence of light. “Hey, mister punching bag,” she calls out as she turns to me. I try to speak but it only results in me coughing. She reaches inside a pocket in her leather jacket and pulls a small object out, throwing it on the ground within my reach. “Dropped it back there on the street. S’yours, right?”

I turn my eyes sideways to look at it, and see a single, shining key. It must have fallen out of my pocket when the guys were roughing me up. My key to a house that I’ve already tried to stop caring about. She must have come here just to give it back to me.

She turns her back on me without a single word and starts to make her way back out of the alley with all the airiness of her previous entrance: the relaxed gait of a casual night stroll, leaving me lying on the ground to fend for myself.

“Wai—,” the word comes half-formed out of my mouth, and I reach out my hand towards her. Though I’m hesitant to call more attention than I needed to from a girl who just took out three guys in the time it took me to take out one, I couldn’t stand just being left here like a fake toy, lost among the refuse of the city.

“Wait.” The word comes out, though in a weak breath. I try to redouble the strength in my voice and shout. “Just wait, for crying out loud!”

I try to stand, and every bone in my body throbs with pain from the attempt. I end up having to support my half-standing posture with a hand on the wall, itself aching from having to exert pressure. At least my noisemaking manages to stop the girl, who now directs her cold gaze in my direction.

“What now?” she says, her voice still as calm as before. “Look, if you dropped anything else, good luck finding it.”

“Are you just going to leave these dudes here?” I manage to protest in between bouts of labored breathing. The girl in the kimono takes in the scene around her, casting her eyes downwards almost as if it’s her first time looking at it. Her sight lingers on the two persons who I took care of in my haphazard, improvised fashion, then finally looks back at me with upturned eyes and a curious sigh.

“You don’t have to worry about them. That one,” she says, motioning her head towards the first of the two, “will probably get an eyepatch and be doomed to do pirate impressions for the rest of his life. The other will have trouble breathing with his nose for a while. But no one’s dead. I’d be much more worried about what the first guy who wakes up will do to you. And yet, here you are, implying that we should get them some help?” “I...guess?” I respond.

“Well see, that puts us in a pickle. Who do we call, hmm? The police? An ambulance, maybe?” Her eyes narrow with each sentence that prods me. I wasn’t thinking about calling the police. Maybe the hospital. But they’d ask questions. If I mentioned self-defense...maybe the police would be faster, but—

“Five-oh are out of the question.”

“And why is that?” she asks, but it feels like she already knows the answer. Her eyes continue to bore into me. There’s no use in hiding it anymore. She’s got me, and if I tried to hide it, she’ll just ask more questions. And so I say it.

“Because...I’m a murderer.” As I say it out loud, as much to myself as to her, time seems to stop and all things grow silent. Far from my expectation of her being shocked, however, she only walks toward me. Her eyes scan me up and down.

“Well, you don’t look like one.” She looks me over, an eyebrow cocked and a hand on chin and lip paused in pensive observation. Overtaken by the moment, and feeling quite shocked by her doubt, I feel compelled to explain.

“It’s true! It weren’t a few hours ago, I swear. I took a kitchen knife and stabbed her over and over in the stomach until everything was all wet and mushy, then I cut off her head. You can’t tell me she ain’t dead after that!” I start to snicker in spite of myself. “The five-oh are all probably in my house wondering where the fuck I’ve gone, all scratching their heads ‘cause of another late night job. Just you wait, I’ll be all over the morning news tomorrow!”

It took me a while to notice that I was making a sort of strange laugh after I said that, the kind of noise that lies somewhere in that ambiguous space between laughter and sobbing. The kimono-clad girl gives me time to calm myself down before talking again.

“Right,” she says, unsurprised. “Well, cool, I guess. You’ve convinced me. Let’s put off contacting anyone unless you want your mornings to have significantly more iron bars than usual. Guess that explains why you’re shirtless. I thought that was what all the cool kids run with these days.” Her cold fingers brush over my chest with a light, almost curious touch. “Hey,” I say, but with little force behind it. She was right. I dumped my shirt since it was covered in so much blood I’d get noticed easily. I just grabbed my jacket to compensate as I ran out of the house. “Ain’t you even gonna say something about me? I really did kill someone. You think I’m just gonna let you go, knowing what you know? Ain’t no difference between killing one person or two.”

That seems to grab her attention. She brings her face closer to mine, eyes half-closed in disappointment. “Yes,” she sighs. “There is.”

“There is what?”

“A difference.”

Her presence is almost overpowering, even though I stand a head higher than

her and she's the one looking up at me. Her empty eyes never stop staring at me, and I gulp involuntarily. I've never seen anything like them before. The black irises are a tempting well that threatens to drown you endlessly. In my seventeen years, I've thought people can be many things: cruel, deceptive. But never beautiful. So overwhelmingly beautiful that I almost forget myself.

"I'm...a murderer," I declare again. I feel that there is nothing more to say. The girl casts her bewitching glance away from me and lowers her head.

"I know. I'm one of those, too." She doesn't explain further. There is no need to. She turns on her heels, and with the wind ruffling her clothes and the sound of her *geta* on the asphalt she starts to leave. I didn't want her to disappear. Not tonight.

"Wait!" I run to catch up to her, but with my injuries still getting the better of me, I fall to the ground. I stand up again, and look straight at the girl, unwavering. "If we really are the same breed of person, then help me," I yell with such uncharacteristically reckless abandon, casting away reason and shame. The girl's eyes open in surprise.

"Same breed? Well, I certainly know what it feels like to have that empty space in your chest. But what do you expect me to help you with? The crime of your murder, or taking care of your wounds? Either way, I can't do anything for you."

"Sooner or later, someone will spot us here. Maybe you could hide me." She ponders the suggestion with a scratch of her head and annoyed grumbling, probably the most human thing she's done so far.

"Are you saying I should help you go find some place where you can hole up?"

"Yeah, someplace no one would think to try and find me."

"It isn't like there aren't eyes all over this city, man. The only place you're really ever likely to find any privacy is your own home," she says, making a perplexed expression.

"Aren't you fucking listening?" I inadvertently shout. "I'm asking you 'cause I can't go back to my house! Maybe you could, oh, I dunno, take me to your

house, asshole!” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. The pain is making me lose my temper. At first I think I’m going to regret saying that, but the girl just nods in understanding, letting the entire thing slide.

“That it? Well, that’s a simple request. If my house is fine with you, then you’re welcome to stay.”

Without even helping me to stand up by myself or offering a helping hand, she starts to walk again, the movement of her back telling me to keep close and follow. With renewed strength to my step that I didn’t know from where in my battered body I obtained, I pursue her. The sound of her clacking steps, and the sensation of the asphalt and broken bottle glass beneath my feet seemed to make both the pain on my body and mind ebb. Though I haven’t even asked her if she lived alone, or even what her name was, I think it too insignificant for the moment. I only see her silhouette, dimly lighted, guiding me like fate. It is the only thing I can see.

## **Paradox Spiral - II**

I hear the sound. An ominous metallic click, coming from the other room.

The time must be almost ten ‘o clock. Dead tired from working my job into the late hours of the evening, I immediately resigned myself to the safety of my mattress after I got home. But it isn’t even a few minutes before I am stirred from sleep by the sound. I heard it only once, but that is enough.

The door to my room opens, letting a slit of white light into my darkened room, widening slowly with each inch of the door that is parted. A shadow occludes the light, and I turn to towards it only to see my mom.

It’s always around this part that I realize, and wish that I could never see this scene again.

The light makes it difficult to make out any detail on her figure save for the fact that she is standing. However, what little I can see of the scene beyond the doorway is clear to my eyes: my dad, collapsed over the dining room table. It isn’t clear at first whether he is merely unconscious or dead, but it isn’t long before I see what I first perceive to be some sort of spilled coffee. It slowly dawns on me that it is blood, dying the varnished brown table into a deep red. It is then that the shadow in front of the door speaks.

“Die, Tomoe.”

I remember what comes afterwards. My mother advances, kneels in front of me, raises the kitchen knife high above her, and brings it down on my chest, then up, then down again, too many times for me to count. Then I see her taking the same knife to her throat, then in a single, determined motion, plunges it deep into

her neck.

All of my nights are bookended by this nightmare, the worst I ever have.

I hear the sound. An ominous click, through which I wake up.

I turn my eyes toward the bed, only to find Ryōgi gone. I lift up my bruised and battered body to observe where I find myself in: a house in the nook of the second floor of a four-floor low rise, the house of the kimono wearing girl. Well, better to call it a room than a house, really. A one-meter long corridor barely deserving the label separates the front door and the small living room, which, seeing as the bed which she slept in is also there, probably also doubles as her bed room. Flanking the corridor to the right is the door to the bathroom. Another door in the living room leads to another, presumably unused, room. She led me to this place last night after an hour's walk. The name plaque that rested beside the entryway bore the name "Ryōgi", so that must be her last name.

That girl—Ryōgi—never said a thing when we entered her room, only taking off her leather jacket and heading straight for her bed to fall asleep. Her apathy almost provoked me to protest, but the last thing I wanted to do was mouth off and have the neighbors be curious. After some consideration, I took a cushion lying discarded on the floor and used it as a pillow, then slept away.

And now I wake up with her nowhere to be found. I wonder what she could be up to. It looks like our ages are quite close. Considering her age, maybe she went to school? And yet, that wouldn't be at all fitting for such a drab room. The sum total of things in her room: a bed, a refrigerator, a phone, a coat rack with four leather jackets, and a closet, which I assume is for clothing. No TV, no radio, no throw-away magazines, and consequently, no table to read them on.

I suddenly remember what she said last night. When I said I'd murdered someone, she said she was the same. I only half-believed her last night, but seeing her room, it might actually be true. Her pad seems to be set for functionality, like a room designed not to be lived in, but instead for someone who could suddenly be on the run at any time and could leave the room behind. Thinking about what she said makes a chill run up my spine. Did I think luck would allow me to draw the ace of spades, but instead brought me the joker?

In any case, I don't plan on staying any longer than I have to. I want to at least give a word of thanks to Ryōgi for helping me out in a pinch, but since she's out, there's really nothing I can do. With silent and careful steps more befitting a burglar than a visitor, I make my exit from the mysterious girl's room.

Without heading toward any particular place, I loiter around town to kill the time. Initially I am hesitant, even a bit scared, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, and think at first that I made the wrong decision. But it soon becomes apparent that the world is turning like it always did, with no one giving me a second glance. The days go on with all the haste and weight of the hour hand on a clock. Somewhat disappointed at the realization, I make my way to the main avenue.

It is here in the main avenue that I expected to find cops asking around for a Tomoe Enjō, or at least people that might throw me the "I saw him on the 6am news" look, but there are none. Maybe the bodies haven't been found yet. Still, maybe I give myself too much credit. There's no way someone like me can affect people's reactions to a noticeable degree with such a half-baked murder. Either way, it seems, for the time being at least, I'm not a fugitive. That being said, I still didn't feel like going back.

Noon comes and passes, and I find myself in Hachikō Square, right next to Shibuya Crossing. I find a bench to rest on and feel content to spend an hour or two just looking up at the neon lights set upon the buildings stretching high into the sky. When the lights turn green, the cars stop to give way to the mad press of people, flowing like water from a burst dam across the large avenue. I can't even imagine what it's like when it's a holiday. The people are mostly teenagers like me, happily smiling and with a levity to their walking pace, looking like they're the most blessed individuals in the universe. It's the face of people in their world: a world where they don't aspire to anything anymore, or need to live for a good future. There's no need to. Their life is all laid out for them, and they know that's all they need to get by in their world. So how many of those smiles are real? All of them, or only a handful? I keep looking at their faces, trying to figure out, but it's impossible to tell the real from the fake. I should have known better than to try, since that realization comes from your own self.

Tired of looking at all the people moving to and fro, I instead cast my eyes

toward the sky. Let's be frank. I'm as much a fake as the rest of them. Maybe at some point in time, I thought that my life was good and real, but reality soon stripped that away.

Junior high school was my time. I was a sprinter in the track and field club, and I kicked ass in it. I participated in all of the inter-school competitions and I never, ever lost. I never even saw anyone's back. No one could say anything about my skill. All I cared about was cutting my time, and even a few milliseconds difference was enough to make me happy. I was an engine built for the sport, and I cherished it more than anything.

It follows, of course, that all this came to a screeching halt.

My family was never one blessed with an abundance of money. Dad lost his job back when I was still in grade school, and never got one back again. Mom was born into a rich family, but had a falling out with them after she ran away to marry my dad. Her world didn't teach her anything about what happens after that. I think that broken family did only one thing right for me: force me to grow up faster than other kids. I had to juggle jobs after school, lying about my age just to get in, all so I could scrape out money to pay the tuition I needed. I stopped trying to care about the antics of my parents, and began to focus only on what I could do right by myself: sustain myself, go to school, and work my ass off for tuition. I thought of running as my only release from both the constant problem of living expenses and my parents who to me no longer seemed anything of the sort, the only reason I kept paying for school and going to the club activities without giving a heed to how tired I was.

Our troubles only truly began when my dad took the car out without a license one day. He was never really good with driving, but it had never bothered him before if he had to take his time parking or maneuvering the car. That day, however, whatever luck that had compensated for his skill ran out, and he got involved in an accident. He ran a pedestrian over. It was apparently a quick death for the unlucky guy. It forced my mom to go back to her family, head bowed and pleading for money just to pay the cost for indemnities. To me it was yet another fuckup that I needed to look away from, and so I refrained from prying too deep. What eventually concerned me is the fallout from all that. It didn't take long for everyone at school to find out about the incident, and though I thought nothing of

it at first, I found that the attitude of everyone at school had changed. My coach, who had always been more helpful than anyone I could remember, suddenly started to ignore me. The upperclassmen who were so proud to have me as the rookie star of the track and field team pressured me to quit. All because of something I had no part in; all because I was their son.

My family was the real problem. Losing what little money he'd saved over to help pay for the accident, my dad was far from fit to keep a family together. Mom started to work part-time in jobs society hadn't prepared her for and she had no real idea how to do, but even that only paid for a portion of the gas and electricity bills. Rumors about the accident began to infest my neighborhood, growing and catching its own embellishments, to the point that dad couldn't even get out of the house without so much as an angry neighbor trying to give him a piece of their mind. Mom still tried to work, but the rumors always caught up to her, and it never made her stay in one place for too long. I remember one time I was just walking around when some random nobody threw a rock at me. And always, there were the threats.

Yet even though the abuses got worse and worse, I never could muster the motivation to be mad at them. After all, the one driving the car, the one really at fault then was my dad. It's all his fault. But then it's not like I hated my folks in particular back then either, because it's when I realized that whatever you do, even if you try as hard as you can, no matter how fast and how far you run, it'll all be the same. You can't escape your family, your past, or what you are. I mean, my folks walked their own path, tried to live a life as best they could, and look where it got them. That's when I stopped trying to fight it. I figured if I just accepted it, then I wouldn't have anything to cry about. It's the moment when you're a kid and you throw away your fantasies because they're useless, and in its place grows a kind of new, self-crafted wisdom.

After that, feeling that there was little else it could teach me, I quit school. Besides, I had to work whole days now for the money. If you aren't picky there's plenty of work to be done even for people my age. Being someone still straddled with at least half a conscience, I couldn't completely abandon my family, and so I had to put money in the house. Still, that didn't mean I needed to talk to them. I never did after I quit high school. Slowly, like a poison, the joy and exhilaration

in running and sprinting that I'd once found essential faded into dim memory, along with the faces of the people who once cheered me on, and the cold wind whipping past my face. It was something I'd thought I couldn't ever live without at one point, and to find that I'd essentially thrown it away gave me no small measure of surprise. My mind made its customary excuses: I didn't need it anymore, there were more important things. But they were only excuses. I lost. I gave up.

That's the proof that I'm fake. If "running" was some sort of origin, a cosmic impetus laid out for the boy known as Tomoe Enjō, then I had failed it. And maybe, my mind thought, things would have turned out better if I had just indulged that call.

My parents took me to see a stud farm once when I was little. There I looked at all the nameless horses, whose lives were bred and figures built solely for the singular act of running, and I cried, thinking that if such a thing as a previous incarnation was truer than a tale spun for the naïve idea of destiny, then I must surely have been one of those beautiful beasts. My passion was born there. And it was killed by the weight of the real. I ultimately amounted to nothing more than a sham, imbued with dreams that only lie.

And in the end, I became a murderer. I laugh, though there is nothing truly funny about it. The sky I look at hardly changes, and I turn my eyes back to the spectacle of the city, where at least the people move, never stopping, with their smiling and content faces, all of us dolls as fake as anyone else with no real purpose. Or maybe they do have a real purpose: to fool around. They are in Shibuya after all. That's the brand of reality I can't really tolerate, though.

The collective footsteps of the throng bring me back to reality. Positioned above the entryway to a nearby building is a clock, showing the time nearing evening. Not wanting to loiter here any more than I've already allowed myself, I push myself up and out of the bench and leave the mass of people, heading for no particular direction.

Even here in the housing district the streetlamps shine no brighter than in any other part of the city. I've been walking aimlessly for the past three hours, and

the autumn sun has long since set, reminding me that I still need a place to stay for the night. Without thinking about it, I find myself back in the familiar façade of Ryōgi's apartment building. Though I always thought that I could let go of lingering affections easily when the situation demanded it, judging by where my wandering feet took me, it seems that's not the case. I look to the second floor, and find that her window is dark. Looks like she isn't home.

"Well, since I'm here anyway..." I mutter under my breath as I start to climb the stairs to the second floor, squaring myself with the fact that the only reason I'm doing this is to hang on pathetically to the last person that helped me in my life. The metal treaded staircase rings a harsh sound as I ascend as if to announce my presence. Confronting the door of Ryōgi's room, I find that the newspaper that was slipped under her door as I left this morning is nowhere to be found. At first I think that she's inside, but when I rap on the door, no response follows. So she came home at least once. Deciding to leave if the door is locked, I reach for the doorknob and turn it.

But it moves unhindered, and the door slips ever so slightly open. As I saw back in the street, the lights inside look like they aren't turned on. In the silence, even the mechanical clicking of the doorknob is audible, and for a moment, it freezes my hand and blanks my mind in hesitation. Thinking myself ridiculous for standing there doing nothing for such a long time, I slowly widen the opening I've made and creep inside. I probably would never have thought as a kid that I would be committing trespass after killing someone not a few days earlier, and yet here I am. Well, she did say I was welcome in her house, but I don't know if this is what she meant by that.

While my mind is busy making excuses, my body is creeping forward, closing the door, going past the entrance, past the short corridor, and finally into her living room. It's black as pitch in here. Nothing can be heard except my muffled footsteps and my suspiciously rough respiration. Man, this makes me look like any random break and enter. Fuck, I need a light. The lights, where the fuck are the lights? I start to take a hand to the wall and feel around for the switch.

At that point, I hear the distinct sound of the front door opening. The person turns on the lights faster than I could even begin to consider who it is. As the fluorescent lamp casts a warm glow over the room, she looks at me with slightly

surprised eyes that blink twice before she starts talking.

“Oh, you’re here. I hope you weren’t doing anything inappropriate, what with lights being off and all,” she says in the manner of someone just berating a classmate. She closes the door and takes off her jacket, then sits down on her bed, rifling through the plastic bag she’s holding and producing a small cup. “Wanna eat it? Cold things just don’t do it for me.”

She tosses the cup toward me, and up close I can see that it’s a cup of Haagen-Dazs strawberry. Why she doesn’t care about my trespassing is as much a mystery to me as her buying something she doesn’t even like. Taking the cold cup in my hands makes me think. She knows I’m a murderer, though I don’t know how seriously she takes it. And yet she offered her room to me. I remember what I thought this morning: that her room looked like she was some sort of fugitive ready to run at a moment’s notice.

“Square one thing with me, Ryōgi,” I say to her. “Are you someone I should be keeping one eye open for when I sleep?”

Contrary to what I expect, she laughs quite heartily at my question. “You’re a strange one, aren’t you? A nice way to phrase that question, I have to say,” she says in between bouts of raucous laughter that throws her already mismanaged hair into even greater disarray. The sight only tells me to be more cautious than before. At length, her laughter finally starts to die down, and she exhales one long breath before she continues to talk. “Hah, well, it’s true that this place has a shortage of people that can carry themselves in a fight better than I can. But hey, you’re here aren’t you? Since we’re both stuck with our respective pieces of wood in each other’s eye, let’s just leave them in there and keep our peace. Is that all you wanted to talk about?”

The kimono-clad girl looks up at me with a dangerously calm countenance of a child expecting to get a new present, her grin laden with meaning. “No, there’s something else I need to ask. Why did you help me?” “Cause you asked me to, that’s why. I wasn’t doing anything at the time anyway, so hey, what the hell. By the way, you don’t have a place to sleep right? I meant it when I said you could use my place for now. Not like Mikiya’s going to come by in a while, anyway.”

Because she wasn’t doing anything? What the hell kind of reason is that? My

brain might be a bit frazzled lately, but not to the extent that I'd believe what she just said. I glare at her, which seems to garner no reaction. She only ignores me, not—I sense—out of indifference, but of a dignified sort of oblivion that just comes naturally to her. It's an alluring paradox. Still, I realize that Ryōgi hasn't given me any real reason to lie to me. Maybe she does have no particular reason to take me in. She could have invented any number of excuses to leech money from me by doing this, but she didn't. But even so...

"Are you serious? You take me in no questions asked without even being suspicious of me? You sure you aren't high?"

"You are seriously damaging your goodwill here, buddy. And to answer your question seriously, no I don't take drugs, and to answer the question percolating in your mind, no I didn't report you to the police this morning. Although I will if you tell me to."

Well, nothing to worry about on that front. Besides, just the thought of this person talking to the police in polite tones seems like an impossible picture to paint in my mind. "Then what are you after? Is it a quick fuck, because—"

"Huh? There's far better places a man can go to for sex in this town than my place, that's for damn sure."

"Well, see, what I'm saying is—"

"Alright, fine, whatever man! If you don't like it here and you're just gonna stand there and criticize me then you know the way to the door, buddy. I absolutely do not understand why you feel the need to judge every word out of my mouth, you know that?"

Her words brook no refusal. A silence hangs between us, but is broken by her rummaging through the plastic convenience store bag again, pulling out a triangularly-shaped tomato sandwich. Well, if I had any doubts about whether or not she thought nothing of me before, I don't now. "Well...then I'm sleeping over! You said it was fine, didn't you?" I say maybe a bit too loudly. Ryōgi, for her part, doesn't even seem all that angry, even though her words seem to indicate otherwise.

"Yeah, go ahead. I'll be sure to tell you if your asshole glands are working up again," she says while nibbling on the sandwich. At that, I suddenly realize how

tired I am and promptly sit myself down on the floor. Time passes, but I can't seem to give a mind to how long or how short that lasts. I turn my thoughts away from my little spat with Ryōgi to more practical matters. I'd found a place to sleep, if only temporarily. The 30,000 yen in loose change I hastily took with me should last me the month for food, but finding some way to work so I can survive while still hiding from the cops is going to be key.

Wait. Now I remember what I was supposed to ask Ryōgi. How could I forget?

“Hey,” I call to her. “Why ain’t your door locked?”

“Lost the key, obviously.” Her answer is almost like a blow to the back of my head. “I only lock the door when I’m sleeping, and I just close the door when I’m out. Works for me, and as you can see, not much here for a burglar to burgle.”

So my attempted trespassing wasn’t just some lucky coincidence. Her not locking the room might even be the reason for why she barely has anything in the room. Some regular thief could be slipping in and just stealing what isn’t nailed down. It’s too much of an assault on my regular sensibility that I have to tell her off.

“Christ, girl. You could at least ask for a spare one from the landlord.” “Lost the spare too. C’mon, it’s not as if you have to worry about it, and it’s not as if I need one.”

It’s really starting to grate on me how she just takes everything in stride. I can’t have any sort of peace of mind without a key. Meanwhile, Ryōgi here seems to lack the part of your brain that’s supposed to sound warning alarms when you aren’t secure even in your own home. I forget about my anger toward her some minutes ago and replace it with worry for this reckless girl.

“A house without a key ain’t a house. Just you wait; I’ll get you a new key.” An idea suddenly forms in my mind. I remembered the last job I managed to hold down, until two days ago at least, was in a moving company. I got to learn a few things about fixing some household related stuff, so a simple doorknob replacement wouldn’t be beyond me. They must have some kind of regular doorknob in that warehouse of theirs. “No, scratch that. I’ll replace the whole damn thing.”

“Well, whatever floats your boat. Do you have money for it?”

“Of course I do. It’s the least I could do for you. In fact, I’ll even do it tonight, so you’ll have no problem tomorrow!”

And on saying that, I stand up immediately, filled with a force of will whose origin even I couldn’t even begin to guess. I run towards the entrance, twist the doorknob, swing open the door, and break out into a run into the city canopied by night, barely allowing Ryōgi a word in edgewise. Here I am, a wanted (or soon-to-be-wanted) man sprinting to a moving company I planned to rob in the dead of night, putting some serious thought into how I could slip in without getting caught. Forget Ryōgi. Going on this little excursion for a girl whose first name I didn’t even know pretty much makes me the certified crazy one.

## **Paradox Spiral - III**

I've been living with Ryōgi for close to a week now. Over time, we've established a simple pattern to our lifestyle. She wakes up, sometimes going out earlier than me. Sometime later, I go out for the day as well, and we only really see each other's faces again when I come back to sleep at night. It's strange business to be sure. At some point, we gave each other our names, thinking that it'd be quite strange to not know each other's names when it's obvious I'd be over for some time.

Shiki Ryōgi. A repeating high school student...well, on paper at least, considering her current truant history. That's pretty much the sum total of what I know about her.

She calls me by my last name, Enjō, which is why I might be given to referring to her similarly as Ryōgi. She's said more than once that she didn't like being called by her surname, but I can't bring myself to call her Shiki. It's a pretty simple reason. Calling someone by their first name has always seemed to me to be like some stamp of permanence, but this daily life right now is as temporary a setup as I can imagine, which means someday, me and Ryōgi will part ways. At any given time I could be actively hunted by the police. I could be forced to run. Calling her Shiki, with all the baggage that the first name tends to give you, will just weigh me down when that day comes.

“Don’t you have a girlfriend, Enjō?”

On this night, like all the other nights, Ryōgi sits cross-legged atop her bed,

and as always, asks me a question that seems to come straight out of nowhere. As for me, rolling around on the floor right next to her bed, I've long become accustomed to them.

"If I had one, I wouldn't need to swing by this dump every night, would I?"

"That's kind of strange, considering you're not all that shabby looking." "That actually sounds more like an insult than a complement, coming from you. And besides, I've had enough of women."

"Interesting. Why, I wonder?" She lies down on the bed, which from my position on the floor next to it, makes her temporarily unseen, though she soon pops her head out directly above mine. She's actually kind of cute like this. "Are you gay?"

I take that back. Seeing her as anything resembling cute must have been a trick of the mind.

"No way. It's just that, well...I've got a history with girls, and it didn't work out too well." Before I know it, I'm already reminiscing with her. "Back in high school, I went out with a girl for two months, and we spent most of that quality time arguing. I didn't want anything special from the relationship, but she certainly did. She wanted all the cool, fancy things that also happened to be expensive. I could practically hear my wallet screaming at the time, but I still did it for her. When I could buy her things, she was happy. When I couldn't, she complained. That didn't warm me to the experience. And the sex wasn't all it's cracked up to be, honestly. Besides, I could've just jacked off if I wanted to feel good."

I thought this story would bore Ryōgi, but she actually seems to be hanging on every word, so I continue with a sigh. "Eventually, I started to dislike her. All the money and affection I gave her slowly looked more like a waste of time. Maybe if I was a normal student, I could've given her more of my time, but as it stood then, I didn't have that kind of freedom. The hours I spent with her started draining any hours I had left for sleep. Without the free time, I guess it was doomed from the start. But, stupid as I was, I never tried breaking up with her. I never liked to hurt or get hurt, and it was definitely one of those times where I could've made her cry."

“But you did break up with her, didn’t you? How did you do it?” Ryōgi asks, intrigued.

“Hey, I ain’t the bad guy here. She dumped me. One night, after we had sex at a motel, she turned towards me on the bed and said—and this is a direct quote I swear—that I never really looked at her. That I only looked at her appearance and not her heart. Now that was a real sucker punch right there.” Before I even finish talking, I already hear the spasms of laughter from Ryōgi going from chuckle to guffaw. When I shrug my shoulders as I finish my story, her head disappears back toward the bed, and she finally lets the suppressed laughter out.

“Wow, you are a piece of work, Enjō! ‘Didn’t look at her heart?’ That was a girl with a lot of baggage, I can tell you that.” I hear the springs on her bed creaking as she rolls to and fro in her bed, laughing accusatorily.

“Well, at least I never made the mistake of making fun of children’s love. It ain’t funny.” I stand up, indignant, which makes Ryōgi restrain her laughter by degrees. She rubs her eyes before she sits up and looks at me straight.

“But it *is* funny, Enjō. You just don’t see it. I mean, look, what’s the only thing people can see of other people? Their appearance! She thinks her appearance is so insignificant, and yet she forces you to buy all that flashy bullshit. And then she asks you to somehow look at her ‘heart’ or something, which no one can really see? Shit ain’t right, man. So you see, it’s funny! If she wanted to you to see her heart, she could’ve been better served writing some literature down on paper. Breaking up with her was the best thing that ever happened to you, Enjō.”

She returns to lying down on the bed, facing away from me. There is a beat of silence before she looks back at me again, her catlike eyes staring into me. She starts to open her mouth somewhat pensively, but hesitates and looks away, then looks back again before she finally speaks.

“Well, just so you know there’s no hard feelings, I’ll tell you something someone once told me. He said that ‘it’s those unseen, unvoiced things that form love. And it isn’t right to give voice to them, or else they might turn into lies.’ That’s what he said anyway.” At that, she turns away from me again, and I know then that she’s already closed her eyes to sleep. With that abrupt end to our conversation, I turn off the lights and lie down on the floor to sleep as well,

letting the rare silence engulf the room and allowing myself to think. I accept that I might have slipped up with one girl, but my mind entertains the thought. What if—what if it was this girl? Would the same things still apply? Or would she, as she always seems inclined to do, just laugh it off and accept it?

I come back to Ryōgi's room one night on the second week of my extended stay. I plunge the key inside the lock, turn it, and open the door. I walk inside to find Ryōgi already sleeping. Though the noise I'm making just stepping into her room is probably enough to wake her, she doesn't. She must be sound asleep, or else ascribing my footfalls to a category of acceptable noise not worth waking up to. Either way is good.

I hold a palm to my cheek, still smarting from being hit, as I approach my usual spot on the floor and sit down. The clock on the desk beside Ryōgi's bed ticks the time away as the second hand moves to the next mark, and the next, on and on in a circle. At the moment, both the minute and hour hand lie at peace pointing at twelve. I've never liked the analog ones. Staring at them, I always feel like I could slowly lose myself in the rotating, spiraling hands. The pain from the kicks I received in my leg flares up again, and I utter a low grunt of complaint in spite of myself. Ryōgi however, still remains unmoving, allowing me to look at her face deep in her deathly, petrified sleep. In two weeks of staying in this empty room, one thing always arrests my vision. When Ryōgi sleeps, she looks almost like a doll, a lifeless thing sleeping atop the bed; so much so that when the sun rises, she doesn't "awaken," but performs something I liken to an act of resurrection, as if life has been breathed into her for another day.

At first, I thought that she woke up early for school but I soon realized that was not the case. It's always a phone call that gives Ryōgi the impetus to actually go out. She waits for it everyday. If no call comes, she confines herself here, consumed again by the doll-like languor. Needless to say, while I didn't know the subject of those calls, they were no doubt about something dangerous, something that excites Ryōgi enough to have the willingness to go outside.

The interminable ticking of the clock burrows its way deep into my head as I ponder on the simplicity of Ryōgi, her beautiful life devoid of any sadness,

returning only to a joyous vitality when she does whatever it is she needs to do. The perfectly empty life without overindulgence, the existence of the “real” that I never thought I would find. The sort of Platonic ideal of existence that I wanted to become.

“Shiki.” The word escapes my lips, more silent than a whisper and seeping out like a silent exhalation, and yet, seemingly at cue, Ryōgi chooses that exact moment to wake up. A crease forms between her eyes as she looks me over.

“What the hell happened to you?” she asks. Guess she noticed all the bruises on me.

“Had no choice,” I sigh. “Two guys I didn’t even know tried to jump me, and since they were spoiling for a fight, it got messy. Not really good at this whole fighting business, so there you go.”

“You must have studied something, at least. And yet, you still have trouble beating on two guys. What, does getting hurt turn you on?” Ryōgi observes wryly as she pushes herself up from the bed.

“Don’t assume anything. I’ve never taken any sort of class in a martial art. Still, if it comes to a fight I can give as good as the next guy.”

“Which is to say, not much at all. I thought for sure you learned something, since I saw you use the palm of your hand to fight when we first met. So where’d you learn that?”

“I heard somewhere that for someone who wasn’t used to it, using your fists would just hurt you as much as you hurt them. So it’s better for people like me to just use the palm. Besides, isn’t the palm harder? I mean, look at cans. No one punches a can. Everyone crushes it with their palm, right? There’s something there, man.”

“It’s cause it’s easier that way, dumbass,” she says with the usual calmness in her voice. This time though, I detect a sense of faint praise from it as well. Her eyes are as intense as they ever are, and it makes me break eye contact with her from embarrassment.

“How about you, Ryōgi? You must have studied aikidō or something.” “Just a passing interest in aikidō, actually. I’ve only been really serious with one style

that I've been into ever since I was a spoiled brat."

"Since you were a kid? No wonder you could plant a roundhouse in the back of a running guy's head. I'm guessing that's not all there is to your style, though." Though I only intended it to be a casual statement, Ryōgi takes my last sentence to think on seriously.

"Kind of. It's sort of a style of my own. The key to it is the mindset. You rethink everything about yourself. Your breathing, your footwork, your perspective, how you think—even the way you move your muscles changes, and it's almost like becoming someone else. All of it is honed towards taking down your enemy as economically as possible. I mean, I suppose all martial arts touch on it to some extent, but I guess we...I mean, I took it too far."

She spits the last words out as if she hated the entire concept, to which I have to react with some amusement. "What's so bad about that? At least you don't get hit like me, and you get to take out two dudes in two seconds. It's one cool self-made style if you ask me."

Her eyes wander away from me, and seem to hint at some heavy disquiet before she replies. "Weird thing about that self-made style: I learned it by sort of watching someone else do it."

When she immediately plops back down on the bed, I get the feeling she doesn't want to continue the conversation anymore. As she goes back to sleep, I'm left to contemplate what exactly her last words meant.

In a room in a slice of nothingness, dull gray steam rises, the hissing sharp enough to pierce the ears. There is a heat here enough to make anyone break into sweat in moments. The room is unlit, save for the dim orange glow of something burning on an iron plate. All around me, there are large canisters lined up one after another, and on the floor, I feel countless amounts of narrow tubing brush against my legs.

Not a single soul can be found in the room. Only the hissing of the billowing steam and the useless sound of bubbling water keep each other company.

I wake up violently to a cold, dead night. A dream. It was a dream. A

nightmare maybe, different from the usual one. Still, there was little to like about it. The second hand on the clock ticks away as if to mock me, and when I turn to look at it, I see the time has not even passed 3:00am. Still quite a while before I usually wake up.

The next thing I notice is that the familiar shape of Ryōgi lying on the bed is gone. Must be another one of her strolls. She does them every so often. Why they need to be done at an ungodly hour when even the fauna sleep is beyond me. I worry about her sometimes. Even though she can fight, that doesn't make it all right for her to take a walk so late alone in a city full of people ready to take advantage of that. I briefly think about going out to find her, even though I know full well that not messing with each other's private lives has become some sort of unspoken rule for me to live here.

Ah, fuck it, I'll go. She's pretty enough that it's going to be hard for all the thugs down in Shinsen to just let her pass by without incident. I rise, and as I'm about to open the door to go out into the hallway, the door unexpectedly opens with to admit a girl dressed in a familiar kimono and leather jacket inside. Ryōgi promptly closes it with as little sound as she made opening it.

"Hey, you're home," I say. She casts her glare upwards to look at me. And in that moment, I feel something.

She could kill me.

The lights in the hallway behind her are turned off, and only Ryōgi's eyes shine a frighteningly deep blue in the darkness. My breathing is cut off, and for a while, my mind spaces out and I stand stock still unable to do anything in that moment of pure dread.

"You won't do either," Ryōgi says, not even trying to hide the consternation in her voice. When she speaks, I snap back to normalcy. She brushes past me, taking off her jacket and flinging it across the room toward her bed in anger. She takes a seat on top of the bed and lazily leans back on the wall behind her, offering an upturned head and a blank stare towards the ceiling.

Trying to ignore the chill that is still running the circuit of my spine, I make an awkward about-face from the door and return to the living room to sit down in a random spot on the floor. The invisible third inhabitant of this room—the unseen

and heavy silence that blankets everything— again passes between us, as it does so commonly, until she breaks it with her monotone words.

“I went out to kill.”

Unable to form any sort of appropriate response to her, I only nod my head to acknowledge what she said. She seems to take it as a sign to continue.

“Useless. I couldn’t find anyone I wanted to kill. When I opened the door and you were there, I thought that you could satisfy me for a time, but you couldn’t. Killing you would’ve been meaningless.”

“I honest to God thought you were going to kill me right then and there,” I reply hesitantly but truthfully.

“I want to feel like I’m alive. But I know a simple murder has no meaning. It’s why I drift aimlessly at the late hours, trying to find a reason to live. It’s almost like being a ghost. One day...I just know I’m going to kill someone for no reason.” The words come out like a conversation thrown toward some unseen presence as much as it does a disclosure confided in me, almost resembling the torpid speech of a junkie on withdrawal. This is the first time I’ve seen her like this. The first time we met was during one of her nightly strolls, but she didn’t seem to be spoiling for a fight back then.

“Get a grip on yourself, Ryōgi. You’ll manage,” I tell her, as I stand up and place my hands on her shoulders. Shoulders that seem so unnaturally slender for someone as dangerous as her.

“I am managing. This is how I do it. I got this feeling back in summer too, and that time when—” her speech trails off, like she just remembered a memory she’d like to forget. I sit back down on the floor, and Ryōgi takes that as a sign to abandon her position on the wall and collapse on top of the bed sideways.

“Hey, Ryōgi,” I probe, not really expecting any further clarification. She’s the one that said to me that the heart is unvoiced and unknown to all except you, lest it turn into a lie. It’s easy to understand. She’s all alone. I was once like that, but at least I had, if not real friends, then just people who I could distract myself with so that the problem wouldn’t be so obvious. But she doesn’t have that luxury. She had no need of them.

“Hey, Ryōgi,” I repeat, letting my back rest against the bed so I wouldn’t see her. “Do you have any friends?” Some seconds pass to delay her response before she speaks again.

“Yeah. I think I do.”

“Wait, you do?” I say incredulously, expecting a completely opposite answer. In contrast, Ryōgi just nods calmly. “Then there’s an easy solution! Just go to them and dump all your problems on their lap so they help you. It’s the best and easiest thing to do in your condition. Even just small talk is usually enough to make you forget all about it.”

“Well, he’s not here now. He’s out of town, doing God knows what.” I fall silent listening to the echo of loneliness in her words, but then, as if to say that the spirit of her solitude was only something I imagined, she starts to hit the bed violently with her clenched fists. “I mean, that guy just barges in here without so much as a warning, and how does he return the favor? Oh, nothing except a freaking phone number, is all. He even had to take a nappynap in bed for a whole month while I took care of business last summer. Why do I have to be constantly irritated at him? I mean, what an asshole, right?”

The sound of her fist hitting a pillow repeats itself, and her voice grows increasingly louder with each new sentence of her spontaneous rant. I almost can’t believe that Ryōgi is getting this much of a rise from a single question. Now the dull thuds turn into sounds of sharp stabbing, almost like Ryōgi is piercing the pillow with a knife. I don’t think I really want to know exactly what she’s doing so I restrain my curiosity to turn around and look. In a little while, the tearing sounds stop and she finally calms down. As for me, I kind of become envious at this friend who can raise her to such heights of emotion (for her at least), and at the risk of further reaction, I decide to ask her about this person.

“Say, Ryōgi...” No answer. Guess she must still be mad. I pay it no mind and continue. “This friend of yours from your school or something? What’s he like?”

“Yeah, from high school,” Ryōgi responds nonchalantly. “Guy with a name like a poet.” I decide not to puzzle out the meaning to that just yet. “So this guy is the reason you go out at night, isn’t he?”

“Nah. My urge to go out at night and kill is just me being me. What’s the

matter? You really wanna find out what could possibly make me scary enough for you to practically wet yourself when I went in?"

"What, me, scared? I'm not—"

"You're the one that said you thought I was going to kill you." Her voice is a cold sing-song tune that latches itself onto the nape of my neck, tracing a chokingly smooth line around it, and for a moment, I am forced to wonder if the person lying behind me is truly human. "See? You're thinking it again. But rest easy. It's the danger that really pumps those pleasure chemicals for me, and killing you wouldn't be so dangerous now, would it? Still, it would probably be best for you to find a new place to hide, Enjō. In the end, the pleasure I get from murder is going to bite me in the ass, and you with it."

Her intonation falls to the volume one expects of an act of contrition. Goddamn it. The only thing it does for me is make an already distant woman even more distant and inscrutable. I understand now; that easily as much as I am terrified of this implacable person—

—I have fallen for her just as much.

"Dumbass. That's not like you and you know it," I say. "That's just you being upset. You've got two options here: mope, or call that friend of yours and go through it together. That's what friends are for, and if you don't do it, you'll just cut yourself off from socie—"

Awkwardly, my words cut off at that point. Like Ryōgi a few minutes ago, my mouth was starting to take over my mind and spouted the first thing that came to mind. With both of us noting the strange pause, I decide to end the conversation. "Well, that's all I wanted to say. Good night, Ryōgi." I then proceed to lie sprawled on the floor, still not permitting myself to look at her.

She says something to me, but I ignore it as I try to sink into slumber from the embarrassment. For tonight at least, I've lost all confidence to talk with Ryōgi. It's a pretty simple reason. When I was saying those words, when I don't even have a friend to call my own like Ryōgi does, I felt like the biggest hypocritical bastard alive.

## **Paradox Spiral - IV**

Here, back in the dilapidated back alley where I first met Ryōgi, even the buzzing sounds of the city streets turn into nothing more than distant echoes coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. I can remember the blood here so vividly that I can even recall their bitter smell. But they're gone now, swept up, like everything else, into the alley grime and the cold of the late October morning. Even the white puff of air that quickly disappears as I exhale is a testament to this phenomenon. From the same everywhere and nowhere that the flood of people are located, I single out the sound of a clock and its ticking, imagining the hands going round and round.

It's now been a month since I threw away my home and my livelihood and ran away. And yet, there is still no visible indication that the police are after me, or even actively investigating what I did. Every day, I pass by the window of a nearby electronics store with a display television tuned to the news. I watch diligently, but up till now it has not reported anything on the murder I committed. The story is the same for the newspapers I can spy or steal from the stands. What I did was far more than a simple, random murder. No, it's the kind of thing that journalists can't resist putting up on the 6:30 news for the public to go crazy about, no matter what police embargo they were under.

Maybe they haven't found it? No, that can't be possible. Still, the thought of the bodies not being found after a month makes something churn in my stomach in a feeling almost like nausea, and engulfs me in a sense of melancholy. I briefly entertain the idea of checking to see if they're still there, but pass on it because I don't have the guts to, and the possibility of any five-oh staking the

place out to see if I'll come back. I suppose there's nothing else to do except sit here on the sidelines and wait for any sort of sign.

Still, at least once...at least once I want to see it on television so I can finally have an excuse to disappear from Ryōgi's life. Once the name Tomoe Enjō rings out in society as a the name of a murderer, I'll only cause trouble for Ryōgi, and that's when I can finally cut what little ties we have and make my exit from this wretched city. But maybe that's already too late for me.

The clock echoes from its indeterminate location, and the wind seems to grow in strength with each recurring tick. Following the course of the cold north wind, I walk away from the alley.

As I exit the maze of back lanes, I notice a familiar figure come into view in a far pedestrian crossing. Who else could it be in a kimono and a leather jacket except Ryōgi? And yet, even further away from her I manage to see another faintly familiar face: one of the guys present on that violent night when me and Ryōgi first met. With well-practiced steps, he lurks a ways behind Ryōgi, trying not to draw attention to himself.

This could get bad. I stand there for a moment debating what to do, but the ticking of the clock forces me to action. I make my way into and through the press of people and stalk the man stalking Ryōgi. It doesn't take very long and far for another of his number to join the man, the same person that Ryōgi delivered a roundhouse to. It doesn't seem like they plan on doing anything to her, or they'd have done it already; there were plenty of chances for them in the past few minutes to do so away from prying eyes. Instead, they seem to be content in keeping watch on her for now. Surprisingly enough, they seem organized and rehearsed, with not a single step out of place or fumbled. After an hour, the front-and-follow show comes to an end with the two breaking off their tail. Curious as to their destination, I continue to shadow them as they quicken their pace to head into—

—the same alley I was in an hour ago.

This looks like a trap, but if it's for me or for Ryōgi, and for what purpose, I can't know. The disquiet in me grows. I slip beside the entrance to the alleyway, where the space is graduated into a narrow passageway, and stop to listen. I turn

my head little by little around the corner to sneak a glance at what the two could be doing. As my vision pans over to what little I can see inside, I freeze at what I see.

A man in a vivid wine-red long coat, whose silhouette tells of long, tall, and slender features, stands in the middle of the alleyway. His hair is a long, blonde fall from head to back. Even from this distance, I can see the condescending, almost pitying expression on his face as he opens his mouth to speak.

“■■■■■——” He speaks in a language that echoes out in power, and magic, and ambition. And though I don’t understand it, I somehow understand the fluency with which he wields it.

I feel someone’s presence behind me and quickly turn to meet whoever it was, but find no one there. I swing my head back to look at the alleyway, but in that small span of an instant that could not have been more than a second, the man had vanished.

The north wind blows through the alleyway, passing through me, seemingly more frigid now than before. I shiver in spite of myself, and hold my arms close to my body. The shiver starts to intensify uncontrollably, and for no particular reason, an urge to cry takes over me, and I barely resist it. In that urge, I feel in my skin a tremble of entropy, the end of an autumn, and in my bare face I feel the very end of me.

When night falls and me and Ryōgi are back at her room, I tell her all about what happened this morning. As usual, however, her reply is concise to the point of unhelpfulness.

“Really?” She draws the word out with a barely suppressed yawn. “And?”  
“Don’t fucking ‘and?’ me! Those guys weren’t the only one watching you. Do you remember seeing any foreign dude with a red long coat?”

“Hmm, guy sounds like a ball to hang out with. But no, I don’t.” She quickly loses her interest in the conversation, just as she always does in anything she deems of no real or immediate consequence. I have a feeling that even if you falsely accuse her of murder, she’ll pay it no real heed. To her, the weight of

external events is far less important than her own feelings. Sometimes, I almost feel like I want to emulate that state of mind, but this was a moment of exception. That man was as real as anything I've ever seen, containing something like a purity similar to Shiki Ryōgi, and beyond my reach.

“Can you just listen for one second to what I’m saying? It’s not like this is someone else’s problem. It’s yours!” My yelling somehow gets Ryōgi to prop herself up on the bed and sit atop it with crossed legs. She looked at me as I tried my hardest to show a stern face. After staring each other down for a brief moment, she speaks.

“Alright, I get it, it’s a problem. What I don’t get is why you’re so worked up about this, Enjō.”

“I worry because you’re an idiot and wouldn’t know better.” A brief pause. “I don’t want you to get hurt or anything.” A gulp, a moment’s glance away from her, and then, “because I love you, goddamit.”

The bickering atmosphere seemed to evaporate in an instant. There, I said it. The word that should never be. Even though I promised not to say it on account of me leaving eventually. Ryōgi, for her part, looks at me with cocked brow, as if observing some quaint curiosity. Several seconds pass in this way until she finally...

...bursts out laughing. Her first laugh was so sudden that she would have spitted out milk if she had any in her mouth.

“What—” She tries to stop herself from laughing but can’t. “What the hell, Enjō? Shit ain’t right, man. You’re not in love with me. You’re just—” Another fit of boisterous laughter. “You’ve just been hypnotized or something by that guy in a red coat. Take a flashback, I’m sure you’ll remember a pendulum dangling in front of you!”

So even this is a matter to laugh off. Her disbelief only agitates me further.

“No, it’s the god’s honest truth! When I saw you, it was the first time I saw anyone so real, and someone so like me. But you—you’re not fake like everyone else. I’d do anything for you to believe me.”

I draw closer to Ryōgi and put my hands atop her shoulders. That reduces her

laughter to a giggle, and finally stops it altogether. I see her shift her eyes to look at my arm, and then back at me.

“I see,” she says dryly. Suddenly, she grasps my shirt collar with blinding speed. With one smooth movement, she throws me like paper over and atop the bed, leaving me looking upwards with her face looming close above mine as she lies on top of me. I have no idea when she had the time to produce the knife that she is now holding in her free hand. “Then will you die for me?”

I feel the tip of the blade prick my neck ever so lightly, and see Ryōgi’s eyes narrow into a sinister glint. I know at that moment that her question isn’t whether I would die doing something for her, but if I would allow her to kill me for her own pleasure, nonchalant and indifferent as she always is. The only way she can show any real affection. I’m scared, so scared of death that my body is paralyzed by it. And yet, I don’t have long for this world anyway. One day, the police are going to come knocking, and then there’ll be no going back. And it is with that consideration that I say:

“Yeah. I’d gladly die for you.” There is the tiniest shift, the smallest movement on Ryōgi’s brow, and it lets me know that I said something she didn’t expect, and for a moment, she hesitated, and her eyes slightly return to familiarity. “Do it. Kill me. It’s not going to be long now anyway. I killed my parents, and that means the death penalty. I’d rather have you kill me than the law and a noose.”

“You’re a parricide?” I can still feel the knife tip keenly on my neck, but the strength behind its grip has ebbed noticeably. There, before I die, I decide to lay bare the horrible memory that haunts me, just to convince myself I took my one last opportunity at penance.

“Yeah, killed both of them. They were no good—kept racking up debts that I didn’t know about and wasting all of the money. Had enough dealing with their bullshit, so I took a kitchen knife to their guts and stabbed them over and over, to make sure I didn’t make any mistake. That night was cold as hell, but those organs and intestines...they were all so *warm*. Like you could feel the heat going up from their spilled guts and it wrapped all over you. It almost made me go numb and crazy. My fingers wouldn’t let go of the knife, and my arm just kept going up and down, up and down by itself. You couldn’t tell whether I took a knife to them to kill, or if I just wanted to go crazy and mix up some human

insides; you couldn't even tell whether a person killed them, or an animal."

I think that it would only be appropriate for me to break down in tears now, but the tears won't come. Instead, I feel a strange sort of relief, as if killing my parents truly did make me find freedom.

"Tomoe, why did you kill them?" Her voice hangs on the border between inquisitiveness and pity as she asks the question I know would come. What was the answer, then? Was it because I hated them? Because they were more trouble than they were worth? Only lies I whisper in silent nights to salve the memory. The truth, the real reason is,

"I was scared...of a dream. A dream where I come home from my job late at night and lie down on my bed. I can hear the shouting match between my mom and dad from the other side of the door, but the noise stops. Soon after, the door opens, my mother standing in the doorway, and beyond her, my dad covered in blood and lying dead. Then my mother kneels down on top of me, brings up a knife to stab me over and over before she slits her own throat. The dream is so real, I thought I'd really died. But morning came and I woke up just the same. That's supposed to be the end of it, right? Just my desire to kill my parents manifesting itself one night, right? But when I started to see it every single fucking night, every time waking up breathing hard, almost screaming, I couldn't stand it. I was scared of that fictional night where the dream would come alive. And one night, I decided I couldn't stand to experience it one more night, and I broke. So I killed them, before they could kill me."

I remember that night as clearly as a happy memory. I'd hid the kitchen knife beside the mattress, and when mom opened the door for some reason or another, I charged her, knife out and straight towards her chest. I stabbed her over and over, as if to make up for all the times I had been stabbed myself in my dreams. And with that, I was free from my useless folks, free from that ominous dream, with nothing to tie me down. A dirty, bloodstained freedom.

"You're one goddamned idiot, you know that?" says Ryōgi frankly, with a lack of restraint that snaps me out of my reverie. She's right, more resoundingly and more profoundly than probably even she knows. I'm one hell of an idiot to have not thought of any other way out of my situation except to kill my own parents. But even now, I don't regret it for a second. I'd sooner be caught by the police

and be put behind bars than to have endured another day of my former life. But I did realize one thing when I was explaining my crime to Ryōgi: how can a boy who has only ever looked out and cared for himself start to care about a stranger like Ryōgi? It seems like some sort of fallacy, a lingering paradox, an act to which I do not have any right to perform. Knowing this, it's probably no mystery why she just laughed off my proposal. But that doesn't sway my love for her, the one thought that I find in me to be truly real, if still regrettably tainted by my sin. When I realize this, the fever of passion that had seized me minutes ago began to subside. But even in this paradox, I still consider the murder a necessary action, and for me there are no regrets.

Ryōgi's eyes hanging above me are distant and unclouded as they stare into me, studying every quiver of the lip shaped by spoken words and every crease and line formed on my face from unspoken emotion.

"You misunderstood your choices. If your parents were like that, and you've lasted until now, then you could have borne that pain a bit more, like you always did; chosen the easier way. But in the end, you had to make it harder for yourself. When I first met you, I thought you were trying to deny who you were. You were empty. So here's the question: did you change since that night? Or do you want to die now just as much as you wanted to then?" asks the girl who would kill me on a whim, the girl I had surrendered my life to.

She is right again. Another contradiction. I tried to cast my life away on that night, thinking it alright to murder someone in a deserted alley, but also thinking it wouldn't be so bad for the same thing to happen to me. Just continuing to exist aimlessly, like a wind-up doll conducting some bad facsimile of humanity, seemed like a burden with each step. And yet, I didn't want to die, didn't even want to kill myself. That cruel paradox seized me as if to tear me apart, and the same thing is occurring now: facing Ryōgi now with my sins bare before her, and still not completely embracing the death that is staring into my face, even though I know life is just a slow slide to the eventual end. My end will just be a little earlier, a little stupider, and a little more worthless than other people. It's the worthlessness that I can't seem to bear. If that's the way it's going to go, then...

"...dying by your hand would be more worthwhile, more real." "Maybe,

maybe not. The only thing I know is that you're not dying tonight. Not because of me, anyway. I don't need to take your life." Ryōgi lifts the knife away from my throat, and then puts it away. Like a cat losing interest in a toy, she gets up from the bed and walks away from me, retrieving her jacket from the coat rack as she does so. Looks like she's about to go out somewhere. I can't stand to look at her anymore. "Tell me, Enjō. Where's home for you?" Ryōgi's voice reverts to the coldness I recognize since the first night we met.

Funny question to ask. Me and my folks kept moving, never staying for more than half a year in any one place; I assume either because of the unpaid rents, or the collection agencies would come knocking. Ever since that started happening, I've hated the setup and wanted a real, normal house. Like the one we had when I was a kid.

"A dump called unit 405 in an apartment somewhere. Why are you asking?"

"That isn't what I asked. I'm asking about the place you really want to go back to. Well, if you don't know, can't say I didn't expect it." Ryōgi opens the door leading outside, and without turning to face me, she says, "Ciao, Enjō. Come by any time you feel the need."

She goes out the door, and with a turn, she disappears from view, seemingly taking all of the color of the room with her, leaving everything with an air of dreariness. For several minutes, my rust-tainted soul looks over the room where I'd spent the last month of my life, before I decide to depart and separate myself from the dull monochrome.

## **Spiral Paradox - I**

Winter's finally come.

Much like how I could have used a bit more summer time than what was given to me this year, the town is also owed its debt of autumn. Even now, as I'm looking out the window of the office, the sky that hangs over the city is pregnant with snow threatening to fall. It almost feels wrong, like the order of things and seasons were manipulated, leaving little trace of the autumn that came somewhere in September and expired in November faster than one could have possibly noticed.

During that time, in October to be exact, I was dragged by a relative of mine to a driving school he ran out of town, somewhere in the boondocks in Nagano. It was like some sort of "drive camp" where you stayed for three weeks and finished the curriculum faster than most driving schools. I was kind of annoyed to have to leave this fine city for a month, but seeing as I couldn't turn down the request of a relative, and that my boss, Miss Tōko, gave her blessing for me to go, I didn't have much choice in the matter. They ran that place more like a military camp than they do a school, but after three weeks of that miserable nonsense, here I am, back in my home turf, for good I hope.

"Full name: Mikiya Kokutō," I read aloud from the driving license in my hand. It's smaller than an ATM card, and yet it has all my pertinent information written on it: my name, address, date of birth, and to top it all off, a picture of my ugly mug pasted on the front. The most innocuous but common form of ID that a person can get. "What do you make of this license, Miss Tōko?"

On a bed in the corner of the room lies Miss Tōko. As I throw the question to her, I expect no real answer, but—

“A contract,” —she does answer, in her usual puzzling way. She’s been laid low by a particularly nasty flu that put her temperature at 38 degrees, which is the reason for her current bed rest. Still, she seems as indomitable and alert as ever, proving that not even flu can make her sleep in working hours. That, or she’s probably hungry, seeing as it’s half past noon.

Despite the window being closed, a chill still runs through the room that charges the atmosphere. It might be because we’re in the fourth floor, in Miss Tōko’s room to be exact; a room that I’ve not been to many times. I’ve moved the chair beside the window and Miss Tōko’s bed so I can better keep watch over her. I look over my recently acquired license as I contemplate the bad luck of my situation: after three weeks of driving—that is not, by the way, necessarily fun—the only thing that waited for me back here is a silently sulking Shiki and a sick Miss Tōko. While they claim that they have improved relations in my absence, one need only hear about Shiki’s complete refusal to help Miss Tōko, as well as her uttering of “Here’s to hoping the flu melts your brain” right to her face as she downs a glass of water, as proof to the contrary.

The full name of that capricious individual is Shiki Ryōgi; a girl, though her manner of speech combined with her somewhat ambiguous features can make people understandably confused. The one beside me with a wet towel on her forehead is Miss Tōko Aozaki, my boss in the company I work for. However, besides Miss Tōko, I’m the only one employed in this “company,” so it’s a bit suspect to call it as such. She is, in simple terms, some kind of genius; and as is often the case with geniuses, is frequently lacking in good company. It seems that she has confined herself to her bed the entire day, though the fact that she is awake and not resting tells me that it’s more of an excuse for her to not work than through any major fault of the flu itself, though she did curse herself for not getting her shots this year. While I’m inclined to tell her that she should go get herself to a doctor instead of lying around here, I’m practically the last person she listens to. She said to me once that mages are often obstinate people, and as a mage herself, she is probably one of the most obstinate of them all. It’s precisely that sort of pride that stops her from just going to a doctor, loathe as she is to

surrender herself to the care of any sort of “expert.” And so I resigned myself to not being able to meet Shiki and nursing Miss Tōko back to health, at least for now.

“A contract.” She repeats her half-hearted answer as she retrieves her glasses near her pillow. Her back-length red hair, regularly tied back in a ponytail, is untied today for convenience. Under normal circumstances you’d first notice her stern and even slightly ominous character, but in the current situation, I can recognize how pretty she is, almost enough for me to ascribe her as a different person. No doubt to prevent herself from falling asleep, she continues the conversation. “What that is,” she points to my license, “is a sort of contract for you having learned how to drive. This whole country is upside down, nowadays. You don’t study to learn anymore. You study to get the test results. And as soon as you get your results, the meaning of everything you learned just fades away. It doesn’t tell you anything, except for the fact that you learned something to a certain shallow degree. It’s just a contract. The reason and the result are all mixed up. It’s like a paradox, isn’t it?” She raises herself up from the bed and rests her back on the headboard as I respond.

“But isn’t that what results are for? I mean, everyone studies for one reason or another.”

“Of course the opposite is also true. It’s reached such a state where the goal and the result, the act and its impetus can be flipped and switched around. Just as there are people who drive right after they have a license, so there will also be people who will obtain a license after they’ve already learned to drive, and so ace the test.”

Miss Tōko is normally much more polite than her usual self with her glasses on, but today, possibly because of her fever, she is even more so. I’ve long learned to treasure such rare moments. Normally, she’d use that last sentence to point to herself—considering that I know she took the written and practical exam with little trouble or error, so much so that the instructor just glared and sniffed at her—to lord her authority. Still, I feel like it’s not the same without her citing stories of her genius past, so I feel compelled to point it out for her.

“I know you were one of those who didn’t even need to take lessons, weren’t you, Miss Tōko? Hmm, the image of you going to one of those schools is kind of

—”

—disturbing. And funny. I can’t even imagine it.

Sensing the gist of the unsaid words, Miss Tōko glares at me and gives the best scowl she can manage in her condition.

“Come now, Mikiya. I was a student back then and it wouldn’t have been so out of place for me to go to one. The way you swallowed your words just now, you’d think I had four ears and a tail.”

She furrows her brow and closes her eyes in an apparent show of dissatisfaction. I never really thought about it before, but I suppose Miss Tōko had her teenage years too. As I think that, the image of a prim and proper student version of Miss Tōko pops unbidden into my head, and it makes me gulp, and my heart skip; I can’t exactly pin down whether it’s because of fear or humor.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but the image my mind is conjuring up looks like you from another dimension.”

“Oh, I see how this is. Now that I’m sick, you show you’re true colors, hmm?”

That forces a little chuckle on me. I’d have to do that, seeing as all the humor is usually aimed at me. I have to scale the balance of power somehow. I stand up to replace the towel on her forehead, which elicits a triggered response from her:

“I’m starving. Go. Cook.”

Regrettably, the congee she had this morning is already being digested in her stomach, leaving no food immediately at hand.

“We’ll have to order take-out. The udon with eggs from Kongetsu sound fine?”

“Aww, no. I’ve eaten that enough times to know exactly how many sips it takes before it cools down. C’mon, Mikiya, just cook something already. You’re a happy bachelor with your own place, so you should be able to whip something up right?”

I want to have a talk with whoever popularized that suspicious correlation. Regardless, I shrug my shoulders even as Miss Tōko looks on me with eyes filled with the expectation of delicious gourmet food, and I reveal to her the cruel

truth.

“Well, unless you want nothing but noodles, I can’t do anything for you ma’am. At worst, it’ll be some college-staple instant stuff; at best, it’ll be simple pasta. If that’s fine with you, then hey, let me in the kitchen.” She frowns almost instantly.

“What about the congee you made this morning? That wasn’t some supermarket congee, I can tell you that much.”

“You’ll have to thank Shiki for that one. She doesn’t cook much, but she’s pretty good when it comes to Japanese food.” Miss Tōko lets out a low hum, I suppose indicating her surprise. Shiki being able to cook isn’t actually such a great surprise if you think about it. She was a spoiled brat of the Ryōgi family, who are known for their traditional...well, everything. And so Shiki’s palate must be similarly adjusted. She eats pretty much anything, but I guess it’s only because she’s learned to forgive the plebian tastes of the food that everyone aside from her makes. When she makes food, it’s on a level that she can personally call good, so it’s really just natural that she’s so well-practiced in it.

“It’s kind of surprising that Shiki would do anything for me. But I guess, considering how well she handles that knife of hers, it isn’t really out of place when she uses it for something other than stabbing.” She produces a long sigh of disappointment. “Well, since there’s nothing to be done about it, how about for now you get me those medicine bottles on top of my desk, Mikiya?”

After begrudgingly accepting that she’s not getting to freeload a meal, Miss Tōko lies back down on the bed. I approach her desk to retrieve the three medicine bottles on top of it, but something catches my eye. A photo is propped up on top of the desk, showing what I’m sure is some country that is not Japan. A cobblestone path frames the bottom of the picture, and in the background is a famous clock tower. The sky that is captured in the frame is the same sort of snow-threatening gray overcast that plagues the city today, and below it in the center foreground, three individuals stand beside each other, two men, one woman. Both men are impossibly tall, but only one of them seems Japanese. The other exudes an air of someone at home in the place, without a single mote of unsuitability or discomfort.

The Japanese man in the photo has cruel features that, even in a photograph, command respect. His face is partially obscured, though not enough to hide his appearance, but it gives me a sense of disquiet to just look at him, as if he could leap out of the page through sheer force of presence. My chest tightens as I think in passing that he seems familiar; makes me think about that rainy night that I'll never forget—

As I edge my face closer to the picture to get a better look at him, my attention is drawn to something else. Between the Japanese man in a black coat, and the blond, blue-eyed man in a red coat stands a young girl. She sports an ebony mane that makes the Japanese man's coat look faded in comparison, and it stretches all the way below her waist. Her features tell of a peaceful, resplendent teenager, seemingly born from a cross between a hidden flower grown in darkness and a benevolent spirit's visage.

“Miss Tōko,” I utter unwittingly, “what’s this picture about?” I hear her rustle on the bed to turn to me, though I don’t see it, still engrossed at the two clashing images in the photo.

“Oh, that? They were...old friends. I’d started to forget their faces, so I took a picture out of the old album to reminisce. That one’s from when I was in London, the place that was witness to my first and only mistake.” I don’t fail to note that Miss Tōko’s voice has changed, and a quick glance toward her confirms that her glasses aren’t worn but are placed on the bedside table. Though she says it’s only her personality changing, not her identity (unlike a certain other old friend I know), it really makes little difference from my point of view. Miss Tōko without glasses is, in a word, cold; with the speech, ideas, and actions to back it up. Despite working for her for months now, I’ve never gotten used to it once.

“Let’s see, how far back was this again?” she wonders. “Must’ve been ‘round the time my sister got into high school, so it must have been at least eight years. Always seem to have trouble calling back the faces of the guys in those photos. Guess it must be some sort of sign.”

She turns away from me and lies face up into the ceiling, as if speaking the words straight into the air will make her remember them better. It’s a rare sight to see her reminiscing like this, just as it is rare to see her in any sort of illness

like now; that is to say that they have both never happened. The flu must really be doing a number on her.

“Wait, London? As in, ‘tea and biscuits’ London?” I ask, incredulous, as I set the three medicine bottles down on her bedside table, pull the chair closer to the bed, and sit back down beside her. She pauses to pop some pills into her mouth, then lies back down face-up and continues.

“Yeah, that London. I’d ran away from my granddad, and though I managed to liberate a few bucks in the process, it was hardly enough for a living. For a neophyte mage such as myself, who had no resources or skill in the Art enough to make a sanctum of her own, there was really no other choice except to suck it up and get myself into the Collegium. It’s sort of like a university, with all the oldness, the shabbiness, and the academic snobbishness that implies. Still, I couldn’t complain. It’s hidden in the British Museum, a domain beyond prying eyes that nurtured many of the archmasters of today. For me, it was also a treasure trove of unexpected wonders.”

The way Miss Tōko tells it, it seems as much to remind herself of those half-remembered times as it is to tell me a story. As she talks, I notice her growing only the slightest bit paler. When I interrupt her to say that she might have taken the wrong medicine or something, she waves me away.

“Come on, Kokutō, this is a rare opportunity for you to hear about this, so let me talk a little more. Let’s see...it was kind of an awkward situation for a twenty year old girl like me to study abroad, especially since the Aozaki’s have a... history with the Confederatio Magi. I elected to study the runic Art, since I knew practically no mage was interested in it at the time and they needed researchers badly. Took me two years to decide that I’d done the best I can for their college, and another two for me to get my mitts on the original runes from the Thule Society. It was then that I finally got my own sanctum away from the Confederatio and their prying eyes. It was then, when I was engrossing myself in my soon-to-be life’s work of making dolls, that I met him. He had an interesting background as some Taimitsu sect monk or some such, and a drive to seize knowledge and the greater mystery that surpassed even my own. He was passionate, almost zealous, like hellfire given form. For the most part, he turned people away, and misery seemed to follow him everywhere. His technique in the

Art was second rate, but no one could doubt his skill in the arcana he did know. I kind of liked that guy.”

Miss Tōko squints her eyes in a look of deep consternation, and she must surely be envisioning that man now. It is a glare laden with deep hatred and pity. I barely understood her rambling, though I still offer a weak “Mmhmm” so as not to make her pop a gasket in annoyance. “So you learned how to make dolls abroad?” I ask to fill the time, though I realize that it is such an out of place question it is almost unintentionally hilarious. Miss Tōko, for her part, only nods and acknowledges it. I really don’t mind listening to Miss Tōko ramble on, but it really is much worse for me if I can’t understand. That’s why I think maybe it’s more appropriate for her to talk about this stuff with Shiki and Azaka and to leave me straight out of it, but Miss Tōko, spurred on perhaps by the heat of her fever, shifts the gears dangerously high on the conversation.

“A writer once said that ‘a designer knows he has achieved perfection not when he has nothing left to add, but when he has nothing left to take away.’ That’s what I was trying to do when I was making dolls, Kokutō. I tried to make that perfect human, to ascend that indescribable ‘ ’. The man I told you about tried the same thing, except he used the soul instead of the flesh. He lived to solve that problem with the unobservable cat in the box, to see beyond the definite truth of the box and see the unseen soul of the ‘ ’ inside. It almost resembles that ‘collective unconscious’ bullshit by that psychiatrist a long time ago. He thought he could reach the origin if he just followed the breadcrumbs, the little clues left for us here. We both tried to reach that origin, the infinite stream that traces out the source of all humanity. People now are so divided amongst races, and skills, and capabilities, and inheritances, that it’s impossible to count the plurality of it all. So much has been added, and so much to take away, so much that we can’t reach the origin of all these skills and ancestry that we like to label causality, and other people like to call fate. It’s become almost like a formula you can manipulate; add this ability, add that trait, and the wonders of deterministic outcomes gives you a life from the genesis of the genetic blueprint that is so predictable to that creature of Laplace that it becomes droll, and if you want to call it fate, then so be it. We’ve made too much of ourselves in the never ending human imperative for omnipotence. The four bases that comprise the helix structure that composes all of humanity are so simple, yet

so complex as to comprise a spiral, cumulatively accumulating unto immeasurability until we all fall into a paradox of our own creation, a paradox that can't be observed. That's why humans and mages alike will never ascend to the origin they aspire to—so I resolved to make one myself. But it was useless. In the efforts I poured blood, sweat, and tears over, I couldn't make the Platonic human, only a perfect me."

She pauses for a handful of seconds, allowing herself to breath. I perceived her rambling to be one long breath, a speech that sounded like she said it without knowledge of punctuation marks. The color flushes back to her face, due to the medicine no doubt, and yet the eyes which stare into nothingness retain their dim quality. She adds a final note.

"To think that bastard is still trying it, even now. I know he was cast out by his mentor for daring to find the origin of a person. He is one stubborn son of a bitch to still be hopeful. One thing I hope, Kokutō, is that you never encounter that man in the photo. If that ever happens, run away. Fast." With the last ounce of her strength, Miss Tōko lies back down peacefully on the bed and closes her eyes. In an instant she is fast asleep, her chest rising and falling with each whispered breath.

That was...wow. That was some medicine, to make her ramble on like that and then sleep so contentedly. I replace the towel on her forehead one last time and leave the room as quietly as I can so as not to disturb her. I emerge from her room to the deserted office. Only the distant, keening noises of steel from the neighboring factories intrude in the solitude. While the shrill echoes crawl up my skin, I think to myself: I can't hold true to Miss Tōko's request. There is that little burrowing feeling in my mind, a minor tick that keeps saying I met that man two years ago. Though I can't be sure that man in the photograph is really the one that saved me on that night. The memory of the night, the uncertain identity of the man, and the words of Miss Tōko are still six different jigsaw puzzles that I'm trying to solve while the pieces are mixed together. The peaceful atmosphere that had permeated the room only moments ago disappears in the disquiet that breeds and multiplies in my mind and reaches down to my spine.

## **Spiral Paradox - II**

A day later in noontime, November 8, the weather is still disinclined to change its depressing overcast tint, and it shares this gloom with the office that has no light to stave it off. The office is actually a wide space, albeit littered with many assorted occult trinkets and knick-knacks from Miss Tōko's collection. Even given this, it's too big of an office for just Miss Tōko and me. There's enough desks for ten people to all work at the same time, and there's even a sofa for any unexpected guests. Of course, the concrete flooring is a dull, gray, undecorated thing (unless you count the scattered artifacts and books as decoration), and the walls tell much of the same story, with no wallpaper to call their own, but if we had enough employees to fill those desks then by God this would actually look like a halfway decent and productive working environment.

Sadly, today only three people fill this vacant space. Miss Tōko's desk is by the window, yet the woman herself is clearly nowhere close at hand. Through the wonders of modern medicine, Miss Tōko's flu was as good as gone when she woke up this morning, which she celebrated by going out as soon as she could throw on some clothes, leaving me to shoulder the workload. Today, the job is to order some of the materials we need for her art exhibition next month. I'm holding the list she drew up of things she needed while I sorted out my own list of people from whom I could buy the stuff on the cheap. She usually doesn't bother with the grueling detail work like this, preferring to just show up and start selling. But I suppose this is part of what she hired me for. I spent the better part of the morning with one hand on her list and another holding the phone receiver, trying to negotiate prices, and then repeating the process for the next retailer, and

so on in a seemingly never-ending chain.

While I sort out the trouble and trying to decide whether I'm really busy or just painstakingly thorough, two other people are making the room their own for the moment. One of them, Shiki Ryōgi, in her unmistakable kimono, is sitting on the sofa with a look on her face that can only imply a deep, abiding boredom.

The other, a young girl in a black school uniform, sits on the chair behind the desk furthest away from me, across the length of the room. The girl wears a head of dark hair that pours all the way down to her back, and her name is Azaka Kokutō, my sister who is currently a freshman in high school. Ever since she was small, she didn't exactly have the best health, and so it was decided when she was ten years old to move her away from the city air and to entrust her to a relative. Since that time, we've only seen each other a precious few times. In fact, if I'm right, the last time we actually met was New Year's Day of my freshman year. I remember she still had quite the childish disposition then, which is why when I first saw her this summer, I was quite surprised. I guess environment does have a role in your upbringing. She's quite fond of carrying the air of some refined, well-to-do girl, and her demeanor has changed to become fairly active, with no trace of the frailty of body that characterized her early years. When I first saw her, I actually thought she was some stranger and not my sister Azaka, which can probably be ascribed to her changing so much in stature and appearance in the span between ten and fifteen years of age.

I steal a glance at Azaka in the faraway desk. She's sitting there, and close at hand is a book propped open, thick enough that it's likely to cause a concussion when used as a blunt weapon. Her eyes dart from the book to the paper as she copies something, writing it down on a piece of paper; an exercise that Miss Tōko left behind for her to work on while she's away. While the cryptic words of Miss Tōko still hang over my mind, there is just one thing that bugs me much more at the moment.

“Mikiya, Miss Tōko has taken me in as her apprentice.”

She said that a month or so ago, to which I vehemently expressed my indignation, but with her newfound stubbornness, she brushed me aside. Goddamit, I'd thought my family to be extremely normal and boring, but why does she need to be something as eccentric as a sorcerer?

“Azaka?” I decide to take a break from kissing the phone so much and call out to her. She finishes what she was copying with one last, firm stroke before she levels her eyes with mine. Though she doesn’t speak, the clash of the temper in her eyes and her quiet, polite demeanor seems to prod me to continue. “I know that you’re on holiday because of your school’s Foundation Day, but remind me again why exactly you felt the need to travel all the way down here in Tōkyō?”

“You really should go home more often than you do, Mikiya. Maybe then we could discuss this like a reasonable family around the dinner table.” She clears her throat before she continues. “The dormitories were set on fire, and that forced it to close down for repairs. They were requesting that anyone that had homes nearby to vacate the premises temporarily if possible, and so mother called me back for the time being.” She replies with a calmness that reminds me of my high school student council president—and not entirely in a good way.

“Did the whole dormitory burn down?”

“Oh, no, only the east wing it seems—where the freshmen and sophomores were lodged. The school hushed it all up so that it wouldn’t get in the news.”

Interesting. Reien Girl’s Academy is known for raising the stuck-up little kids of some of the most powerful families in the country, and they certainly have the resources to keep the media in the dark about it. It would be a big blow to the school’s reputation and image...especially if it’s arson by a student as Azaka’s words would imply—

“Dear brother, I do hope you’re not over-thinking the situation?” Her eyes narrow as she stares daggers at me. Due to some unfortunate circumstances that happened over the summer, Azaka doesn’t like me poking my head into any more dangerous situations. A silent, Cold War argument always ensues at this juncture of conversations between us, but I decide to dispense with it.

“Heaven forbid, Azaka; I wouldn’t dream of it. But enough about that. What the heck are you doing over there anyway?”

“Nothing that has anything to do with you, I imagine.”

“Oh, I think you’ll find that it does. How do you think I should explain you trying to become a...what was it...sorcerer, mage...whatever you call yourselves! How well would that go over with dad, huh?”

“Oh, so you will show your face in the house after all.” Damn. She’s got me there. She knows that I can’t go back to the house ever since the big argument between me and my folks, the little brat. “And anyway, there is a difference between a sorcerer and a mage, you know. You’ve been working for Miss Tōko for so long and you don’t even know that?”

Hmm, now that she mentions it, I do remember Miss Tōko saying something similar. Like how it’s better to advertise yourself as a sorcerer to neophytes because it sounds mystical and they love that, but that the two are completely different things, or something along those lines.

“Yes, I’ve heard her spiel once or twice before, but there can’t be that great of a difference, can there? Both use that suspicious Art that Miss Tōko always talks about, I think.”

“No, they don’t actually. The Art is certainly a departure from consensus, but in the end, it’s only doing what was already previously possible, but doing it in ways that are logically impossible. For example—” She gets up and walks to Miss Tōko’s desk, retrieving a silver letter opener, a favorite of Miss Tōko’s and one she uses quite often. Spotting some useless pieces of paper, she traces something on them using the letter opener. In an instant, it starts spewing some amount of smoke as it slowly burns.

I watch the entire display without saying a word. Miss Tōko had once done something similar (though on a larger scale), but I’m at a loss for words when I see my own sister doing it. I guess I’ve been imagining this moment ever since she said she’d become Miss Tōko’s apprentice.

“I’m sorry, but I gotta ask...is there any trick to it?”

“Of course. To someone who doesn’t know, it might look amazing, but it’s really nothing special if you think about it. You could do the same thing with a cheap lighter, after all. Whether it’s through a lighter or your fingertips, the fact that you set fire to something doesn’t change. Not so mysterious now, is it? That’s what the Art essentially amounts to.”

I suppose then that the Art is like a substitute for technology. But from what Azaka is saying, it’s probably better to say that technology has overtaken it.

“Rain-making, for another example,” she continues, “is possible with both the

Art and technology. The only difference is the way they go about it, but the effort expended is almost the same. It might look like the mage is doing it instantly, but what they don't tell you is that there is still a lot of preparation. Once it might have seemed like a miracle, but now that's not the case, just like once it might have been unbelievable to reduce an entire village to ash, but now we have missiles to do the same thing. In fact, that might actually be more efficient. The Art is only doing something that you usually can't do on your own, but is still very possible, which makes it very covert. It's not miracle working. The only miracles are things that are still impossible for humanity, things that can't be done no matter how much time and money you expend. The ones that can make that impossibility possible are what we call 'sorcerers,' and what they have isn't just a simple parlor trick like the Art, but 'sorcery,' or real magic."

"Then there would have been more sorcerers than mages in the past, right? I mean, they didn't have lighters or missiles back then."

"Correct, and that terrifying capacity is why people were afraid of them. But it's different now, isn't it? The consensus has changed. There's little need for the Art, and sorcery is slowly disappearing day by day. I mean, think about it, there's little that isn't possible for humanity. That's why there are only five real sorcerers remaining." Her voice lowers in a sadness that is beyond me to understand.

The only thing I can think of that's still currently impossible to mankind is manipulating space and time, and maybe given enough time, even that will be possible, and magic just a fading memory. The way Azaka tells it, it almost seems like a boy that was once captivated by scientific wonders, then became a scientist and discovered the sheer banality of it all. "Then here's hoping the last spell is the spell to make everyone happy." Though I say it to break the mood, the effect is somewhat lower than anticipated as she becomes silent then looks at me like she one would look upon the village idiot, then quickly turns her face away from mine.

She chuckles a bit. "Sadly, even if that were true, Mikiya, very little actually have the capacity for sorcery now. I never wanted to be a sorcerer. Just learning the Art for my own reasons is fine for me."

"Wow, settling for something lesser isn't like you at all, Azaka."

Azaka shakes her head while emitting a vocal tut tut. “Let me remind you that the Art shouldn’t be underestimated. And besides, the Art was once part of actual sorcery too. It’s only because of human technology catching up that there is an Art in the first place. I should probably rephrase what I said earlier. It’s not that I don’t want to learn sorcery. It’s that I can’t. Mages are creatures of long, storied dynasties, starting out with some kind of scholarly past, and then passing what they learn of the greater mysteries to the next generation, which repeats in a never ending quest for ascension. As it happens, I am not a part of one of these dynasties. Miss Tōko said once that she was of her family’s sixth magical generation, and that her third generation produced a magical savant, so even discounting age, she has a huge head start just because she was born into a family with a tradition. For someone like me, it’s more difficult.”

“Man. Rough and tumble world ahead of you, isn’t it?” So it’s kind of like how people with a lot of doting relatives and a truckload of inheritance money get to have the best opportunities. But—“Wait a minute. Then how’d you get to be a mage when I know for a fact that our family never dipped its toes into any sort of occult or mystical stuff?”

“Yes, that’s what Miss Tōko said as well,” she says, sporting a pouting look on her face. “But she also said that I’m one of the few who get it just from chance. She said I was good at igniting things, so...” her voice trails off again.

I have to wonder what the hell her “own reasons” are for learning to light stuff up. For all I know she could actually be the one who set fire to the dormitory

“Didn’t you just tell me that you can’t build up so much proficiency with just one generation of learning? Then why don’t you just stop aiming to be a mage and try finding a real job?” Especially since today’s job climate is stricter than ever, I wanted to add, but hold off on saying so as not to antagonize her further.

Azaka’s mouth starts to form into an attempt at shouting the rebuttal at me, but is interrupted when the sound of a crash and a series of footsteps leap into the room.

“Oh, don’t mind him going on about the economy, Azaka. You’ll get job offers before you know it. Give it two years and you might even be a museum curator!”

The crashing sound was the door opening, and the footsteps belonged to Miss

Tōko, who had returned.

Miss Tōko's footsteps have such certainty of pace that you'd never know she was sick only yesterday. After taking off her coat, she heads to her desk and hangs it behind her chair, after which she takes her usual place behind the desk. Both me and Azaka see her eyebrows come close together in a frown when she looks at her desk and finds the letter opener's position on the desk has changed since she last saw it.

"Azaka, what did I tell you about relying too much on tools to channel the Art? It'll dull your skills. Or maybe you just wanted to show off in front of Kokutō here and not fail, hmm?"

A beat passes without her saying anything, and then "Yes, I'm sorry." The fact that she can still answer faithfully even while her cheeks are beating red with embarrassment is one of my favorite qualities about her. "As for you, Kokutō, it's kind of rare for you to be talking about that kind of thing, isn't it? I thought you had no interest whatsoever in the Art?" "What, you have my sister make kindling out of paper and think I wouldn't have some casual interest?"

"Point." Miss Tōko laughs.

"Anyway, ma'am, do you remember anything about yesterday?" "Everything's a blank after I drank my medicine. Don't tell me I said something embarrassing now." She takes off her glasses and cocks her head in curiosity.

"Erm...no, nevermind."

"Suit yourself," she says with a shrug before producing a cigarette and a lighter from her pocket and putting them to use. She allows herself one deep puff before she continues. "Now Azaka, we need to discuss you talking about certain topics with Kokutō. Covertness and concealment are the best tools a mage has, and don't you forget it. Well, I guess I can let it slip this one time since it's Kokutō were talking about."

"I'm not sure I like how that sounds," I interject out loud.

"Oh, hush," Miss Tōko hisses while batting a hand in my direction. "I only meant that you know what to talk about depending on who you're talking to."

You wouldn't talk about the Art with a normal human being, would you? See? Praise! Who would've thought, coming from me, right?" "Thanks...I guess? Anyway, from what you're saying, it sounds like regular people knowing about the Art is bad for business."

"It's far more than just that. The Art sort of...loses its touch. Or let me put it another way. Do you know where the word 'mystery' comes from?" She leans her head forward on her desk, cradling it above her entwined hands. Her eyes imply the air of mischief that is always present when her glasses are removed.

"I'm not entirely sure, but I think it's from Greek, right?"

"Yep. It comes from the Greek verb 'mūein', meaning 'to close.' It further evolved into 'mustērion', which means 'secret rite.' Both imply a nature of secrecy and a sort of eremitic quality. It's an accurate reflection of a mage's best qualities. They do this because the fact that a mystery is a mystery grants it a value and meaning. Reality deals with beliefs. Enough people believe that magic is gone, almost dead, and so it is. The fact that mages know this, and yet pursue their craft is what gives them the power to reshape reality to their will. In the most crippling paradox for mages, they cannot allow the Art to die, and yet too many mages will deaden it, make it mundane. Without the mystery and interaction of belief and disbelief, both the Art and sorcery, drawing their power from the same origin, would weaken, and the same thing will happen with all the mages in the world."

While as usual I can't grasp the entirety of what Miss Tōko is saying, I think I actually understand the gist of what she's trying to say. If secrecy and concealment are their watchwords, then I can understand why she was kind of peeved at Azaka a while back for performing the Art in front of me.

"Then surely you use the Art when you're in a place where no one can see you, right Miss Tōko?"

"Nope, not even there," she says as she snuffs out her cigarette on the ashtray. "Well, if it's a duel, then I probably have no choice in the matter. Still, a good mage knows how to use the Art without breaking his hands. A smart mage knows not to use the Art when there's an easier way to do something, and there frequently is. Besides, mages are all organized about this. When the Ordo Magi

was formed during the medieval age and started regulating the tutelage of the Art, they knew from the progression of science that magic itself would decay. So they hid the Art, made it even more of a secret than it already was so that only a select few could study it in their Collegium. They police any leak they discover with some stringent punishments: Collegium assassins are sent to kill you if you involve non-mages in performances of the Art, a probable source of that prevalent myth of a wizard losing his powers when revealing its nature to people. Every performance is a risk of discovery, and soon most mages learned to perform the Art only when absolutely needed. Because the Ordo controlled many of the hallowed grounds with rich mana leylines, and monopolized much of the materials a mage needs for any serious research, the few rogues who disliked the decrees were at a significant—and self-made—disadvantage. Power of the majority for you.”

“Erm...Miss Tōko,” Azaka interjects with obvious trepidation. “Does that mean that I have to go over there to the Collegium someday?”

“Well, it’s not like you have to, but you’ll definitely learn faster there, I’m sure. And even then, no one’s going to stop you if you eventually want to leave mid-way. Though they may act like it many times more than most mages would like, the Ordo doesn’t control your life.”

“But then, doesn’t that sort of render their efforts at concealing the Art meaningless? I mean, any random mage could just get out and spread the word, so...” Though Azaka finishes with a noncommittal tone, Miss Tōko nods.

“That’s true. In fact, a lot of people do indeed enter with the intention of learning a few tricks and then leaving for God knows where. But like anyone’s desire to watch corny soap operas ironically, it doesn’t last long. Usually the sheer volume of stuff that the Collegium offers is enough to make them stay. To the serious mage, scholarly pursuit of the Art is supreme. Actually using it is a last-ditch scenario. Studying is what leads a mage to the greater mysteries, and eventually, gnosis. However, you have a distinctly different goal than most mages, Azaka, so I suspect the Collegium would just be poison for you. Still, if you’d like to take all of this a step up, the Collegium’s not going anywhere.”

Azaka exhales gratefully and lowers her gaze, which thankfully tells me that she too is not going anywhere anytime soon. Studying to be a mage is one thing,

but to have her study it abroad in some kind of eccentric college is one thing I seriously wouldn't abide.

"Question time," says a lazy voice from the sofa. "Do the mages there keep secrets from each other too?" Shiki, who up to this point, had been content to sit quietly and stare at the scenery outside (and is, as a matter of fact, still doing so now), suddenly speaks. I'd assumed she just wasn't interested in the topic, but far be it from me to assume what she is and isn't interested in.

"Well...yeah," Miss Tōko replies hesitantly. "It's a very balkanized environment, where you don't usually reveal what you're up to or what you're after until you pass it on to your successor—if then. Secrecy is in the blood, and secrets are power."

"So you study for yourself to gain power you can't use? You study for the goal of...more studying? Guess I just can't understand what meaning there is in that sort of life, Tōko. I mean, it almost seems like all of these mages are working towards a net goal of a big fat zero."

For a moment, Miss Tōko can only smile bitterly at what Shiki just said. "Funny you should say that, since in a way, that's what mages are aiming for. Some call it the 'spiral of origin.' Others like the ring of 'The Akashic Records' better. That grand mass of nothingness. Whatever you want to call it, that's what they're after. It's where everything came from. And if you know where everything came from, you know everything that comes after. It's not even enough to call it ultimate knowledge. It's something higher than that. All the different disciplines and paradigms of learning the Art flow from this single, indivisible source. Whether it's astrology, alchemy, the Kabbalah, Shinsendō, or runes, all their practitioners harbor the same goal. The first fortunate souls that felt its presence dreamed of its potential. It isn't to sponsor the quest for the meaning of man's existence, because they already know it. It is to pierce the great lie of this world and find pure truth, whatever form it takes. Mages of the ideal sort cherish only themselves to live a life that will never be rewarded."

As Miss Tōko slowly relates this to us, the gaze in her amber eyes becomes more pointed, and the color flickers like the flame of old ambition. I ask a question on the only thing I could understand.

“When you say that they’ll never be rewarded, that means nobody’s reached this origin yet, right?”

“Some have reached it. It’s the only way we know it really exists. But those who reached it never came back. They disappeared the moment they attained it. Mages think they ascended. No one can really be sure until you reach it. Because performing both the Art and sorcery means you reach out toward the origin, many mages think we have them to thank for what little of it we can do on this world, since they think that the mages who have crossed over become some sort of anchor for our Art to that side. The bad angle to this is of course, they could never have passed on what they know to anyone. The only reason ambitious mages take on apprentices or spawn descendants is, of course, to ensure that someday, their line can produce the means to get to the origin. There’s no end to their ambition and to their eventual disappointment. Personally, I think it’s just a fool’s game now, especially now when there are mages that are happy to just get in the way of other mages’ work.”

Instead of sounding spiteful in her last sentence, Miss Tōko says it with a little hint of enthusiasm, and I manage to catch a dry, silent laugh from her lips, as if delighting in the fact that these nuisances exist.

“Even if one out of the current crop of mages managed to reach the spiral of origin, they’d never be able to pass it on, never be able to give us new things to learn about the Art. The entire matter is like a fish floundering on land,” Miss Tōko says and shrugs in conclusion. Only Shiki seems compelled to speak out on the paradox Miss Tōko has just presented. “Never heard of a stranger crowd than that. I have no idea why you mages still cling to that false hope even though you know it’s beyond you.” “Maybe because for people who can turn steel into rubber and spew fire from their hands, the word ‘impossible’ isn’t what gives them impetus in their lives, or they’re deluded fools who just don’t know when to quit. Who knows?” Miss Tōko couples it with an amused grin.

“Well, at least *you* know, so that’s refreshing, at least,” she says with just a hint of surprise.

An hour later the office returns to the usual peace and quiet, with everyone

busy working, studying, or in Shiki's case, performing the necessary task of slacking. With the clock having just struck 3 o' clock in the afternoon, I decided to take a little break and make everyone some coffee, except for Azaka, who drinks Japanese tea. The orders Miss Tōko requested me to make are done, and so it is with happy thoughts of a secure paycheck that I sit back down behind my desk and take a sip off the mug. The sound of four people occasionally sipping and then putting the mug down on a desk punctuates the afternoon silence.

Of course, leave it to Azaka to refrain from holding the peace by asking Shiki the most unexpected of questions.

“Shiki, are you a guy?”

My cup almost slips from my fingers at the bluntness of the question. Shiki on the other hand, finishes her sip of coffee. When the cup leaves her lips, I see a face of genuine perplexity, and yet she shows no immediate inclination to respond to my fool sister. Azaka, however, only interprets that as a signal to continue. “Silence means consent, as they say, and that means that you admit you are a man, Shiki.”

“Azaka!” I say sternly. Goddamit. I can't believe I'm diving headlong into this. While ignoring her is probably the best tonic for the situation, the tactlessness of the question and its delivery can't be ignored. I stand up so fast I push my chair behind me in the spur of the moment, but without any words of scolding to throw at Azaka's way, I end up sitting back down in silence. The whole act of sinking back into my chair feels vaguely like what I would imagine Napoleon felt like in the retreat from Waterloo.

“You obsess over the most useless details, don't you?” Shiki replies. Already she has acquired a sour look on her face. One hand rests on her temple in her usual manner of attempting to dispel growing anger.

“Oh? But this is important and necessary information, my dear.” Just as Shiki attempts to maintain her composure, Azaka also gives back with composed placidity. With elbows resting atop the desk and the laced fingers hiding most of her face, she conjures the look of a chairman presiding over a board meeting.

“Important? I don't think it makes much difference whether I'm a man or a girl, and I'm pretty sure it doesn't concern you. Or maybe you're just trying to

pick a fight with me, hmm?”

“I’d have thought that seemed obvious since we first met.”

Though they’re not at all looking or even seeing each other, their eyes might as well be staring each other down. While I’d certainly like to know what in the hell was “obvious,” this doesn’t seem like the right time to ask.

“Azaka,” I interrupt them again. “While it’s a mystery why you feel the need to bring this up yet another time, I will state the answer yet another time. Clearly this time, so your head full of magic can interpret it right. Shiki is a girl. That’s it. The end.” However, the interjection seems to antagonize her more than placate her.

“I know that, Mikiya,” Azaka says briskly. “Shut up for a second.”

*Well if you know then what the hell is this conversation even—*

“What I really want to know is Shiki’s gender mentally or psychologically, rather than physically. I mean, her appearance makes her look like a man, but...” As Azaka allows her voice to trail off, she risks a sidelong glance toward Shiki, whose consternation continues to build to easily observable levels.

“Whatever. I am what I am, and my gender isn’t going to change that. On the other hand, what are you going to do if I *were* a guy?”

“Oh, nothing really. Maybe set you up on a date with some of my friends from Reien.”

I gulp, realizing I can do very little to stem the continual escalation of force. Their animosity toward each other started from the day they first met on the New Year when me and Shiki were still in high school. I invited Shiki back to my house for a while, and that day also happened to be the day when Azaka came home for a short winter vacation stint. It was Shiki she’d met that day, the other personality with his boisterous demeanor and rough speech (perhaps even more so than the present Shiki). It so surprised and angered Azaka that she decided to sleep the day through instead of talking to me. Though I’m not really surprised to see Azaka still carrying that animosity some two and a half years forward, this is probably the point where she crosses some sort of line. I wouldn’t even be surprised if Shiki just wanted to hit her now.

I stand up and start to say, “Azaka, give it a re—” but am cut off by Shiki rising from the sofa at the same time, and saying:

“Gee, thanks, but gotta pass on that one. Those bitches probably can’t take what I’ve got to give, anyway.” Shiki utters a final harrumph before she turns and walks towards the door and leaves the office, the sway of her indigo blue kimono and the sound of her boots echoing in the stair steps the last vestiges of her presence. I briefly entertain the thought of following, but knowing her, she’d just get angrier if I try to be diplomatic about Azaka.

Already planning my later burnt offerings for the miracle that nothing happened, I sit back down on my chair so that I can, at least for the moment, enjoy my coffee. Damn, it’s cold already. Whatever. I finish it off.

“Aw man, she got away from me again. I really did want an answer, even if that meant she would’ve hit me. But her leaving without giving me neither is just dumb.” She adds a click of her tongue to punctuate what she just said as she visibly does a stand down from battle stations by leaning back on her chair and stretching, making the entire thing look like just one fun exercise to her. I’ve long since learned to selectively ignore the bitch switch that turns on in Azaka’s brain whenever she strikes a conversation with Shiki, but this time was such a close call I feel like a chat is in order.

“Alright, Azaka. Let’s have an explanation.”

“What? You and Shiki aren’t making this any easier for me to figure out, you know? Or don’t tell me you haven’t devoted even a second of thought if Shiki is going out with you as a guy or as a girl.” Though her statement is spoken clearly, I have a little difficulty interpreting what she wants to say until I see the copious amount of red blush coloring her cheeks.

“Because I think it’s stupid to think about, maybe? Besides, asking a person like Shiki what their gender is when they don’t want to is probably one of the most faux pas things ever. And again, for the nth time, what difference does it really make if she thinks like a guy but is, in fact, a girl?”

Azaka narrows her eyes and glares at me with clear suspicion. “So, can I take that to mean that as long as Shiki is a girl then you have no problem, right, Mikiya? Then help me out with something. Say two people fall in love with you

—”

I can't help but snort, trying to hold back but gushing laughter.

“—one of whom is a man who underwent sex reassignment surgery for trans women, and the other is a woman who underwent the oppo site process. If they both love you wholly, madly, deeply, truly, who do you choose? The transsexual woman, or the transsexual man?”

Well, that's...difficult. The more I think about it, the more I think this is some kind of trap. Impulsively, as a straight man, I'd obviously go for the girl, but there is no such clear cut choice. The physical girl in this case has had a sex change to a man. Maybe this just goes to show how I just haven't truly grasped yet that love isn't bound by gender? My mind starts suggesting to myself that maybe I only do care about appearances after all, and slowly, I start to feel really bad about myself. Wait, I'm operating under the false assumption that having a gay relationship isn't allowed. If I let go of that, then maybe I go for the girl, who's like, actually a guy, but...oh what the hell, I give up. Wait a minute. Isn't there a paradox in the premise? Isn't this really a trick question? If you're stuck in the mindset of gay relationships not being allowed, then it's a question you can't win.

When I notice this and look up with a face of consternation at the other people in the room, Miss Tōko has a hand over her mouth, snickering and likely trying to dam the floodgates of laughter.

“Oh shit, Azaka, he's malfunctioning. I can practically hear the gears whirring and smoke coming out of his ears.”

“Yes, ma'am. A little Epimenides in discourse never hurts.”

“Dear god, the two of you are never boring, I swear. I do hope the entire family Kokutō are as crazy as you two.” While Miss Tōko begins to laugh her ass off, Azaka looks at me with an entirely serious look on her face.

Oh, so that's what this was all about. Well, I guess it's Azaka's own trademark way of worrying about me. Now, seeing as Shiki wasn't clear at all when she and Azaka were talking, I suppose the onus falls on me to at least be clear on my stance on the subject.

“Whatever you’re trying to say Azaka, I appreciate the sentiment. It’s just that I truly don’t care what sex Shiki may be. Hell, I don’t think I’ll change my mind even if she was still **Shiki**.” I feign an itch on my cheek to hide my embarrassment, but Azaka seems to take what I said quite differently because she stands up from her seat in astonishment.

“Wait, you’re saying that even if she was still that...creep **Shiki** personality, you’d still like her...him?”

“Mmm...yeah, guess so.” Not a second after I say that, I feel the sharp impact of something quite heavy hitting my face, leaving me dazed and confused for quite a while, during which I only hear Azaka say:

“Augh, you suck!”

Then the sounds of her running, the door to the stairwell opening, then her fading footsteps again. Once everything in the world stops spinning and returns to their correct upright position do I realize that Azaka threw that thick book she was reading at me. Azaka is gone, leaving only me and Miss Tōko, now enjoying previously unseen levels of jocularity, alone in the office as I adjust my jaw and rub the blunt force trauma inflicted on my face.

Two more hours pass after that embarrassing interlude and then it’s finally time to clock out. Shiki and Azaka never returned for the day, presumably too livid at each other (or in Azaka’s case, at me). As I brew the last coffee for Miss Tōko and myself before leaving, a practice which had long become part of the ritual of daily work, I consider whether or not I should pay Shiki a visit in her apartment.

“Oh, I forgot to ask you something Kokutō. Mind doing some supplemental work?” Miss Tōko calls out after taking a swig off the mug of coffee I just made for her, which significantly lowered any apartment visit chances in one swoop.

“What sort of ‘supplemental work,’ ma’am? Is this another case similar to the Fujin—”

“No, no, nothing like that. I say supplemental because this one’s not getting earning you any extra zeroes on the check. Remember this morning I went out?

See, I heard this interesting story from my cop friend. You know the Ōgawa Apartments down in Kayamihama?”

“Kayamihama’s the reclaimed land that’s been zoned for public and commercial high rises, right? It’s supposed to be a model district for future residential plans in the city, or so I hear.”

“Yeah, and a convenient thirty minute train ride from here, too. They’re planning some real swank apartments there, the likes of which you wouldn’t see here downtown, but what we’re interested in is this apartment that I worked on for a short time back when it was under construction. Apparently at around ten last night, a white-collar stiff in her twenties was attacked in the street; probably an attempted rape. The guys doing it somehow botched it, resulting in the woman being stabbed in the abdomen and left there as the suspects ran. Without a cellphone or a single soul in sight at such a late hour, she dragged herself inside the nearest apartment complex—the Ōgawa Apartments—leaving a blood trail as she went. But the Ōgawa Apartments don’t house any residents on the first or second floor, so she had to make her way up to the third floor before anyone could hear her calls for help. She managed to operate an elevator to go up the third floor, but I guess she couldn’t move anymore. She kept calling for help but nobody in the units paid her any attention, and she expired around eleven o’clock.”

Damn. Guess that’s what happens when apartments and condos get bigger and the walls get thicker that you don’t talk to the neighbors anymore. Maybe you can’t even hear anything outside, even dying screams. Indifference becomes the nature of politeness. Reminds me of a story I heard recently from a friend, when every single resident from a floor up heard screams getting louder and louder from a unit a floor down. No one knocked to investigate, and in the morning they just found out that the parents killed their own kid. When the police asked them, the people said they all heard it but thought it was some kind of a joke.

“Here’s where the problem starts,” continues Miss Tōko. “That woman was shouting so loud even the people in the next building over were hearing her. It wasn’t even just screams, she was apparently really shouting ‘help!’ The people in the neighboring apartments ignored it because they thought the people in the Ōgawa Apartments would help her out considering her spirited appeal.”

“Wait, you don’t mean—”

“Yep, the people in the Ōgawa building swore they never heard a single soul. I’d pass on this one if it was the first time, but my cop friend told me this is strike two. They had apparently had another similar incident, but I couldn’t check it out. Regardless, something is definitely up there, and my detective friend consulted me about it, so here I am.”

“So what do you want me to do, ma’am? Investigate the place?”

“No, no, we’ll case the place together at some point. For now, I want you to see what you can do about pulling up a list of residents from the Housing Bureau, previous addresses, employment, stuff like that. Again, it isn’t adding any zeroes on your paycheck, so you can take it slow on this one, but I’d like it at least by December.”

“No problem, ma’am,” I reply, voice brimming with confidence. Yet I can’t shake the feeling, despite Miss Tōko’s earlier waving off of the comparison, that this is going to be another weird case like the Fujino Asagami one. I take a drink from the bitter coffee, the mug now nearing empty. “Anyway, to change the subject...Kokutō?”

“Hmm?”

“You really don’t care if Shiki was a boy or girl?”

Fortunately, my well-rehearsed image of office composure holds in front of Miss Tōko, because if Gakuto asked me that question, I would’ve been compelled to spit the coffee in his face.

“I like Shiki, but if I’m allowed to have my way, I guess I prefer her as a girl.”

“Oh, well no problem then,” she says disappointedly and shrugs.

“I think I need clarification on what exactly that means, Miss Tōko.”

“I mean that she’s definitely a girl, physically and mentally. **Shiki** is long gone, so technically speaking, there shouldn’t be any male personality in her anymore.”

I don’t know if I really agree with Miss Tōko since Shiki’s way of speaking is still quite masculine. *Shiki* two years ago before the coma never spoke like that.

“See, you can compare Shiki to the *Taijitu* symbol,” she continues. “We all recognize it: a big circle, white on one half, black on the other, as if each side is trying to consume the other one. And inside each color, we find a small point that is the opposite color, a black point in the white, and a white point in the black. It’s a symbol that swirls and dances in conflict—a spiral of black and white.”

“A spiral...of conflict?” My head throbs a beat. I feel like I’ve—

“Yes. Yin and yang, light and darkness, right and wrong, man and woman. The original reference is to the Chinese cosmology of there once being one, but from the one comes two. In *onmyōdō*, the Japanese practice of divination, this essential divide is known as *ryōgi*, ‘the pair of extremes.’”

“*Ryōgi*? But isn’t that—”

“Yep, Shiki’s surname. Her life with a dual personality was long ago decided for her. Does she have it because she was born in the Ryōgi dynasty, or because the dynasty long awaited the day she would be born, the fruit of their decades of efforts? I’m guessing the latter. The Ryōgi, like the Asakami and the Fujō, are just one of the old dynasties bent on creating an ascendant being by passing on their lineage, long tampered by magic and ritual. They see ascension as their birthright, but their method is decidedly less scholarly. Among them, the Ryōgi dynasty is particularly interesting. They knew that having psionic abilities or the second sight and other supernatural abilities would make them stand out too much in the modern world, so they deliberately developed one that is hidden behind a façade of normality. Say, Kokutō, do you know the reason we have specialists in the world?”

Taken aback by the sudden shift of topic into the question, I become unable to answer. To be completely honest, I think my brain has suffered enough for today, and the amount of information in my head is about to overload. Still, I’d heard a little about Shiki’s family before, but today was the only time Miss Tōko made mention of its similarity with others, some of which we’ve had a run in with in the past.

“That’s because an expert, any true specialist, dedicates his mind for the complete and utter mastery of only one discipline. You pick the one mountain,

and climb it until you can't climb no more. You make it your bitch. The Ryōgi dynasty understands this, and so they found a way to put any number of minds in one body. Like computers installed with various software, they are enabled to excel in many, varied things. That's why her name is Shiki. The same 'shiki' in '*shikigami*', the goetic theurgy. The same 'shiki' in '*sūshiki*', meaning 'ritual.' It results in people who, on a whim, can transcend their notions of morality, their knowledge and skills. Empty dolls waiting to be filled."

I didn't like how Miss Tōko summed it up in her last sentence. It seems to me a disservice to the person that Shiki is. Still, Shiki knew, and still knows all of this. The constant shadow of her unnatural childhood and rearing in a suspicious dynasty is probably the reason why she doesn't allow herself to grow too close to anyone.

"It was Chinese philosopher Fu Xi from whom the idea that from the primordial chaos of emptiness, the *ryōgi*, the pair of extremes, is formed. And from the *ryōgi* come the *shishō*, the four phenomenon, and from that, the hakke, or the eight trigrams. This might be another way to illustrate what Shiki was meant to be. She's trying to let go of her past, despite seemingly being called back to it time and again." Miss Tōko lights her nth cigarette for the day with the flash of a lighter's flame, then points the cigarette at me. "It's you who broke her, really. Crazy people don't think they're crazy by their own. They need another person. It was you, inadvertently or not, that made Shiki think unnaturally of her own existence two years ago."

She thrusts an unlit cigarette toward me. I don't smoke, but I take it anyway and let it kiss the flames of Miss Tōko's offered lighter, and put it to my lips. Recently lit cigarettes always have a curious and mysterious taste to them.

"Man, I didn't even want to talk about the *ryōgi* anyway, but look where we always end up, huh? All this exposition might mean you die tomorrow, Kokutō." Miss Tōko says with a warm smile.

"Don't worry. I'm looking both ways when I cross the road tomorrow, all so I can spend another day working my ass off for you, ma'am."

"Good to hear. Anyway, remember those two little opposite color points in the *Taijitu*? White on black, black on white? All that says about gender really is that

we all carry a little of the opposite sex inside us. Just because Shiki speaks more masculine doesn't mean she's more yang than yin. We all have a little bit of each other. Shiki is female. Her masculine way of talking is, I think, just a way to compensate for the **Shiki** who died. You getting it? She at least wants you to remember him. Heh, she can still be cute in her own way."

Somehow, I understand. She might talk like a guy, but she never acted as much like a guy as the **Shiki** two years before. She's still pretty shaken up by the loss of him, and she never really fully recovered from it. She might put up a good front of it, and other people might be fooled, but I don't make the same mistake. She's still wracked with a guilt and loneliness that's eating her inside out. The vulnerability I sensed about her has changed very little since our high school years.

I haven't changed much either. I still can't leave her alone. And it's been two and a half years since she was last so close to asking it, but when the time comes, I'll save her from that life.

## **Spiral Paradox - III**

The next day I wake up in the morning to a clock screaming nine o' clock in my face.

Jesus Christ, I am so fucking late.

I rush to the office, carrying a package much too heavy with me in a bag shaped like the container to a bamboo sword, to find that Miss Tōko and Shiki are already in and expecting me.

“Sorry I’m late, everybody.” I set the package to stand against the wall and pause to catch my breath, inhaling deeply like I just ran in a marathon. While I reckon the length of the bag to not even exceed a meter, something heavy is definitely inside it, something steel maybe. When I got out of the house, it only took 100 meters for it to turn my arm numb. As I’m rubbing my smarting shoulders (both of them, since I had to keep changing) and stretching my tired arm muscles, Shiki approaches me.

“Hey, ‘morning, Shiki. Nice weather today, isn’t it?’”

“Mmhmm. They say it’s going to be like this for a while, so I suggest you get some exercise in while you can.” Shiki just wouldn’t be Shiki unless she got her morning rudeness out of the way. She’s dressed in a very fancy looking white kimono, which contrasts quite vividly with her red jacket, or it would if it wasn’t on the sofa, looking like it was thrown there with abandon. Her obi today is patterned, in contrast to her usual taste. Designs of falling leaves decorate the sash, and even the edges of her sleeves are adorned with little designs of *mitsuba* and red autumn leaves. “Mikiya, who owns that?”

Her white finger points to the bag rested against the wall.

“Oh, that? Something Akitaka was supposed to give you. You were out last night when I visited you, and who could it be waiting at the door but Akitaka? We caught up on things for an hour, but when it looked like you weren’t coming back for a while, we decided to leave. It was then that he entrusted me to give you that. I think he said it was a Kanesada or something?”

“Kanesada?” Shiki burst out suddenly. “As in the swordsmith-thatinscribes-the-Kuji-on-his-swords Kanesada?” Her face is positively beaming as she immediately approaches the bag and retrieves it with one hand with little difficulty. She begins to pull the string to open it, doing it gingerly as if she was peeling open a banana. It isn’t long before she strips the upper part of the cloth, revealing a long, thin piece of seemingly years old steel. We can only see maybe ten percent of the entire thing, but now there is little wonder as to why it made my arm numb just carrying it around. This piece of metal, about two rulers or longer in length, is further wrapped by cotton cloth, and from what we can see, two holes are set towards the end. It also looks like there are some characters carved in the surface of the steel, but I can’t see them from where I am.

“What in holy hell was Akitaka doing with this?” I’ve never seen her sound this happy or awestruck. She can barely even contain the look of delight on her face. It’s kind of weird and not altogether disturbing to see her unabashedly enjoying herself with this and not the little random things in everyday life.

“What is that, Shiki?” She turns around when I ask the question to reveal the biggest grin I’ve ever seen on her face.

“Wanna see? It’s a blade the likes of which you’ll rarely see these days,” she says as she begins to extract the blade completely from the bag, but Miss Tōko stops her.

“Shiki, I know that’s an old piece of history. Don’t even think of pulling that out unless you want to cut down the ward around this place.” Shiki freezes as soon as she says that. “It’s impressive and all, and I can even read the Kuji: ‘let the warrior-god light my way.’ It’s cool. But the wards that I’ve put up won’t be a match for a sword with that kind of history.”

With Miss Tōko’s words that seemed like they were warning of some great

tragedy if we disobey her, Shiki has little choice except to put the blade away again.

“Eh, fuck it. I don’t think Mikiya’s all that interested in swords anyway. I mean, it doesn’t even have a hilt yet. Akitaka and the others in that house must all be getting senile if they even forgot about that.” Much of the blunders of Akitaka can mostly be attributed to his age, which has only recently passed thirty. If anything, he has a lot to grow into. Still, he’s been helping Shiki ever since she was only ten years old, so I don’t think it’s particularly fair of her to call him senile.

Shiki parts with the blade as if she’s parting with a good friend, feeling the two holes near its end fondly. Only upon later research do I find out that the holes are for fitting the hilt in later. It looks remarkably well preserved, maybe coming from the 16th or even 12th century. If so, it could qualify for an important cultural property, but something tells me Shiki has no intention of handing it over to a museum.

“Old swords build up their own mystery and belief around their ancient history, and so become weapons capable of even cutting spells shaped from the Art,” explains Miss Tōko. “So don’t take that thing out again. I won’t be responsible for any eldritch horrors you may unleash spiriting you away.” After she says this, she breathes with a sigh of relief. “So, Kokutō, let’s hear your reason for being late.”

“Oh, sorry about that. I was busy looking up the stuff you requested last night. Still I have the names of the residents of Ōgawa Apartments, as well as some other information you might be interested in.” The recent spread of public spread of the Internet makes investigating things even easier these days. I got totally into it last night, and before I knew it, it was the break of dawn. All I needed to do was search, supplement it with some things I asked from cousin Daisuke, and I got whole load of information without even needing to head down to the Housing Bureau.

“I told you that you could do it in December, didn’t I? Someone’s eager to start. Well, let’s hear it.”

“Of course. The Ōgawa Apartment building is unique even among all the high

rises in Kayamihama. You can take a look at the weird design blueprint yourself later. Construction took place from 1997 to 1998, and three parties managed the process. You, Miss Tōko, handled the east lobby. I have the list of the construction workers on the building, as well as the construction timeline, if you need them.”

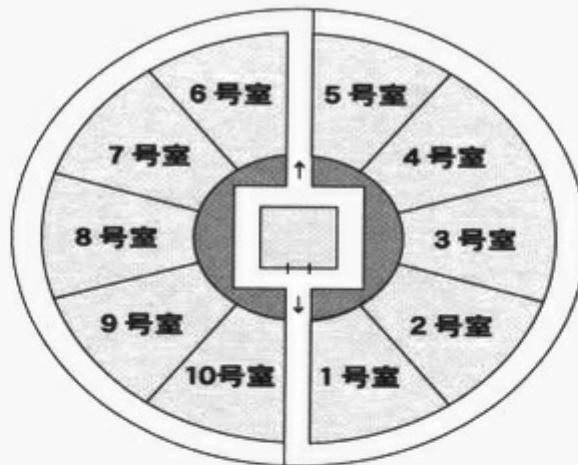
From my bag, I produce the thick stack of print-outs I made for her and lay them out atop Miss Tōko’s desk. For some reason, her eyes are darting over each stack with a look of stress.

“The building’s weirdness actually comes from it actually being two buildings combined and connected with each other. If you look at the blueprints, it’ll make sense. It’s two half-circle, ten-story buildings facing away from each other, and looking at it from the air, you’ll see they form a full, seemingly unbroken circle. At first it was supposed to be some kind of company dormitory, and the first and second floors were supposed to be recreational and relaxation facilities. Due to the recent recession, however, they’ve been tightening their belts and stopped operation of those. Discounting the first and second floor, each floor of each building has five units, making for ten units each floor. Each unit is designed similarly, with three rooms, a living room, a dining room, and a kitchen, and the architectural design is mixed Japanese and Western design. The water piping and plumbing is sort of built clumsily, so they’ll probably have a leak in the lower floors in the next ten years, if not already. There’s a parking space outside that’s good for forty cars, and another underground parking lot for another forty. More than enough for the number of present residents. When the original people who owned it fell into hard times, the entire thing was bought by a new guy. It was his plan to turn it into a residential high rise instead of a company dormitory only this year. They were advertising up until March, but they only managed to fill up a little over than half of capacity. The west wing is due for a renovation at some point. Here, the blueprint.”

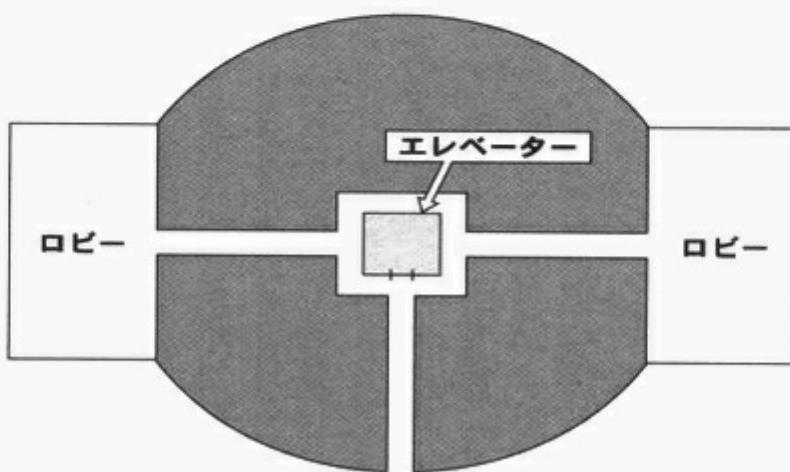
I place more documents on top of the desk, to which she blinks once, twice, before the frown on her face worsens.

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## 小川マンション 見取図



3 F ~ 10 F (共通)



1 F ~ 2 F

“The buildings are separated into an east and west building, but the lobby on the first floor is normal. And there’s only one elevator. It’s a surprisingly faulty piece of equipment for such a big building. Guess we know where the budget *didn’t* go. According to reports, it didn’t even work until May. As for the rooms, the order goes from the six o’ clock position going counter-clockwise, room 01-05 in the east building, then 06-10 in the west building. There’s roof access but it’s off-limits. Third floor residents from room-to-room are: Sonoda, vacant, Watanabe, vacant, Itsuki, Takemoto, vacant, Haimon, vacant, Tōenji. Fourth floor: vacant, vacant, Sasaya, Mochizuki, Shintani, vacant, vacant, Tsujinomiya, Kamiyama, Enjō. Fifth floor: Narushima, Tennōji, vacant, vacant, Shirazumi, Naitō, Kusumoto, vacant, vacant, Inugami. Sixth floor: —”

“Alright, enough already,” Miss Tōko declares, raising her hands as if in surrender and perhaps a little bit of exasperation. “Man, you go all out when I let you go freestyle. You probably have what hand the residents use to pick their noses or something in there.” She motions a hand to give her the list, and I hand it over to her. “I mean, it wouldn’t really surprise me if it did.”

“Thanks. I was getting tired of reading it anyway.” As soon as she casts her eyes on the list in her hands, she gives a long whistle, a rare exclamation of impressed surprise.

“Look at this. It has their immediate family, place of employment, previous residence. Jesus, Kokutō, if you ever became a detective, everyone would line up to get your ass into asset forfeiture.”

“Nah, the guys there do far better than me regularly. I mean, I haven’t even checked half of the families yet.” I was supposed to, but sleep demands got the better of me. In the end, I could only check thirty out of the total fifty residents of the Ōgawa Apartments with any detail. The remaining twenty I only have names and their immediate family tree.

Miss Tōko quietly reads the list I gave her, but since the middle of reading the list of names, she’s been looking at the list with a grim face buried in reflection. Finally, when her glare can no longer contain itself, she speaks. “Tōko, lemme see that list for sec, will you?” She gets up from the sofa and walks behind Miss Tōko, sneaking a look at the list over her shoulder. “Thought so. No one else has

a name that rare.” She clicks her tongue, in approval or annoyance I can’t say. “Sorry folks, but I gotta head in early today. Got any wheels I can use, Tōko?”

“I guess there’s the 200cc motorcycle in the garage.”

“Riding a bike with a kimono. Right. That’s comfortable.”

“Well, if you aren’t too picky, I have clothes in the locker. They’re a bit big for your size, but they’re probably better than damaging that valuable kimono of yours. Don’t take the Harley out. I haven’t taken the sidecar off it yet.” Shiki nods in assent before grabbing her leather jacket and making off with the bag with the sword blade inside. The sound her kimono makes as she leaves is like an ominous snake. I don’t like it.

“Shiki!” In the height of my disquiet, I call out to her. She turns her head back toward me, looking for all the world like she just remembered a prank that is about to be played on her.

“What is it, Mikiya? Don’t tell me there’s a bad stain on my kimono?” She says it with all the weight of someone just going to do a bit of shopping. Why did I call out to her? What am I supposed to say?

“Er, nothing. I’ll drop by in the evening, and we can talk about stuff then.” “Um...okaayyy. Wait—evening, right? Sure, I’ll be there. See ya later.” She waves a hand in a short goodbye before she closes the door to the office entirely.

It has been one hour since the rare event of Shiki borrowing Miss Tōko’s motorcycle, and me and Miss Tōko decide to pay a visit to the Ōgawa Apartment buildings to see for ourselves. It’s thirty minutes toward Kayamihama, and it doesn’t take us long before her beloved Morris Minor 1000 car is cruising down the coastal bay road, giving us a good clear view of the west coast and the harbor with its loading bays. Kayamihama itself can already be seen from here, with its high rises set against the backdrop of even taller buildings further inland. The scenery of buildings going up and down is almost graphically 8-bit in its solidity.

The apartment complex we’re looking for lies smack in the middle of Kayamihama, a circular building to stand apart from the square and rectangles of the area; visible from far away but it takes quite some time to get to. Finally we

arrive, and it looks even bigger up close than it is from afar.

Its ten floors make it unusually tall compared to everything else where it shares the reclaimed land, and a brick fence to dissuade intruders surrounds the grounds. A long, thin path extends from the parking lot to the entrance, all the way inside to the lobby, making it look like some bizarre Taj Mahal.

“Huh, can’t seem to find the underground parking. Oh well,” says Miss Tōko dismissively. Having no intention of paying the parking fee, she instead parks her quaint old car well outside the apartment grounds. “Let’s go,” she announces before lighting a cigarette and starting to walk. As soon as I get out of the car and step onto the ground, a slight dizziness takes over me, but it’s nothing I can’t handle. Probably the sun today. I walk a little behind Miss Tōko, and I sneak a look up at the roof of the building, only increasing my sense of vertigo. I quickly catch up to her, and we enter the lobby together.

One step inside, and I feel my stomach start to churn. The walls, all a cream color, are maintained with the same immaculate, clinical cleanliness as the floor. It’s all very impressive. And yet, I get an overwhelming unease that threatens to spill into outright disgust at it. A bad premonition that tries to override my mind. The inside of the building is warm like a person’s breath, in stark contrast to cold air outside. The heat coils and warps around my skin in a way that makes me think of the claustrophobia of a womb.

“Just your imagination playing tricks, Kokutō,” whispers Miss Tōko close to my ear, and somehow it stops the dizziness. With much better faculty for thinking now, I give the building another look over. The lobby in the middle seems to be the only thing connecting the two buildings, which will become even more noticeable in floors above the second, as it becomes the only way to transition between the east and west building. We can’t seem to find a manager’s or caretaker’s office here in the fourth floor.

In the middle of all this stands a tall pillar that runs through the centerline of the building; it’s spine. Within this hollow pillar is the elevator, and winding around the elevator chasm is the spiraling staircase. Having the entire thing encased in a single structure repeats the same feeling of claustrophobia earlier.

“Not the most pleasant of buildings, this one,” I comment.

“Reminds me of that Jack Nicholson movie in the hotel. There’s just something really wrong about it, isn’t there? It isn’t a particularly unique thing though. All the little things that go into a building’s architecture can be deliberately designed to toy with your mind. Everything from the color of the walls, to the location and style of the stairs. Change these around in little, but noticeable increments, and it’s enough to drive the ones who pass through it every day to go mad as their pattern recognition goes crazy.” Miss Tōko approaches and enters the waiting elevator, and I follow her. “Which floor, good sir?” she says in good humor.

“Hmm, maybe we could start with the fourth floor.”

“All right. Up we go,” says Miss Tōko as she allows her eyes to wander and look over the structure of the elevator. Even the elevator carriage is circular, twisting inside the spine of the entire structure. Since she seems disinclined to push the button herself, I find the “4” among the buttons labeled “B” to “10” and push it.

Immediately, the elevator springs to life, and I can feel its movement through the building; I can even hear it produce a relatively loud, artificial sound, maybe a clue as to how decrepit the entire mechanism is. The sound combined with the elevator’s circular shape make me feel as if I’m descending instead of ascending. Before long, the elevator’s door opens again to admit us to the fourth floor lobby. The first thing we see in front of us is the corridor that leads to the east building, corresponding with the apartment’s south-facing entrance, just as the blueprint had indicated.

“Follow that corridor and it’ll lead you to 401-405,” I observe. “Keep going and you’ll eventually reach a dead-end confronting the west building’s outer walls.”

“And you get to the west building only by coming back here and going on the opposite corridor behind the elevator right?” Miss Tōko asks. “Yeah. It’s a weird layout. They should have just connected the corridors for convenience.”

“They probably wanted some unique flavor. I don’t know. Uniqueness always takes a backseat to practicality for me. But I guess how you waste cash is what distinguishes one rich person from the next.” She sighs then turns to me, eyes

narrowed in suspicion. “So, Kokutō, what reason did you have for picking the fourth floor? Going to pay a visit to the family that supposedly died?” Her surprising query echoes all along the cream colored walls of the lobby, reflecting off the clean walls and floor like the light above. It’s a room where the time of day becomes unclear, as I sense it changes little in night or day. It is only now that I notice that we never met anyone ever since we stepped inside, and were it not for the lights and the general feel of a maintained space, you’d never know anyone lived here.

“Ma’am, where did you hear—”

“I told you I have a detective friend, didn’t I? Some burglar came in and everyone was already dead, right? I wasn’t able to catch the name, but I knew you were going to go see it for yourself.” Well, she’s right. It’s the reason I woke my cousin Daisuke up in the middle of the night last night, after all. “So, you going or what?”

“Well, that’s what I was planning, but now that we’re here...” I’m kinda scared. Before I came here, I thought the entire thing might even be kind of fun, but now even being here is an uncomfortable experience I’d rather not go through, which only adds to the strength of the butterflies fluttering in my stomach. And yes, I am well aware of the fact that it is broad daylight.

“Now’s the time to go if you’re going, Kokutō. As for me, I want to try using the elevator by myself. Let’s meet later in the floor above this one. Use the stairs. And oh, it might be better to close your eyes as you go. See you later.” I watch her until she gets on the elevator and closes, the lights above the entryway going all the way up to the tenth floor, blinking as they go. I watch it in a daze, unsure exactly what I should be doing, and I realize I’m all alone in the lobby. Now, even my breathing is accentuated by the oppressive silence in the room where time no longer seems to exist; a vacuum world adrift in space in a unique flavour of mixed claustrophobia and agoraphobia. I never knew a building could feel this separated from the outside world.

“Man, she really isn’t coming down, is she?” I utter as I continue to watch the lights in hopes that she could return in short order. Talking to myself usually cures me of any temporary fear, but this time it has the opposite effect. As my own voice reverberates in the lobby, it returns to my ears with a tone that is

practically not mine, only enhancing my unease.

Alright, enough of this. This won't resolve itself as long as I'm here. I steel myself and start walking towards and through the corridor that connects to the east building. As soon as I go through the corridor, the disquiet that engulfed me in the lobby slips away so suddenly it's surprising, only to be replaced by total disinterest. The corridor that runs outside the units opens to the outside, but only to a completely uninteresting view of similar looking apartments. I still stare at them as I walk along the length of the hallway, all the way to the end until I reach room 405.

It was the night on the ninth. A burglar broke into this place and supposedly reported seeing a number of bodies. He returned with a police patrolman on the same night once he reported it, but when they visited again, they only saw a family in the middle of dinner, which only made the burglar crazier. Maybe he was hallucinating. Maybe the entire family were doing some sort of collective play, and it was all just some sort of big misunderstanding. Won't find out till I ring this doorbell, so I do.

It produces the traditional, happy, two-tone sound. After a short while, the room opens with a creaking sound. The first thing I see is how dark it is inside. The second thing I see is someone's arm. Then his head.

"Yes? Enjō residence. Who is it?" Standing in the doorway is a middle aged man, looking and talking as irately as anyone who gets an unexpected visitor in the middle of the day.

And so it turns out that the false alarm really was just a false alarm after all. Nothing seemed to be wrong with that Enjō family in room 405.

I return to the lobby to find that the lights atop the elevator still linger on the tenth floor. I could call it down to go up, but I can already see her finding it out and calling me too much of a scaredy cat for using the elevator instead of the stairs like she said, and so without further delay I start climbing the stairs beside it. The stairs is a spiral entwining itself around the height of the elevator chasm going upwards and ever upwards, lit by dim red lights. Though the lobby air is still cold and dead, the normality of the Enjō family gives me back some much

needed backbone. And yet I can't stop myself from thinking that the red lighting giving the cream walls much of their sinister air feels like a quivering torch flame lighting the way in an otherwise dark castle. Little nooks and corners of the stairwell it's supposed to illuminate remain in the dark, and every ascending step proves to be a little gloomier each time.

I fight my imagination, which seems intent on placing some sort of feral creature at the head of the stairs, escape the melancholic feel of the stairwell and finally reach the lobby of the fifth floor...which looks exactly like the lobby of the fourth floor. I know it's an apartment complex probably made with prefab materials and uninspired architectural design like a department store, but still, the sameness gets me somewhat down.

"There you are. Now let's take a trip down, shall we?" From inside the lobby comes the voice of Miss Tōko. Without saying another word, she hops inside the already waiting elevator. I follow her, seeing her stand in front of the navigation panel of the elevator, waiting for me to get in. As I do so, she speaks without turning around. "Pop quiz, hotshot. If you'd look at the floor for a second..."

"Huh? Oh, okay. I just need to look at the floor, right?" The elevator door closes with little sound to herald it. In contrast, I hear the sound of the elevator mechanism operating loud and clear. It doesn't even take four seconds to get to the destination floor that Miss Tōko punched in. The small, claustrophobic box called the elevator stops somewhere in the larger, claustrophobic space called the Ōgawa Apartments.

"Here's the million-dollar question: what floor do you suppose we're on?" I raise my face to look when she asks. The elevator door is open, and I see the lobby, or at least a lobby. It looks precisely the same as the other floor I was just on, except for one thing: a plastic plaque stuck to a side of the wall with the number "5" on it.

"Wait a minute. Fifth floor?" I'm sure the elevator moved. I heard it and everything. That makes me the one in error. I think on it for a moment only for the obvious answer to come drifting into my mind not a moment later. "We were just on the sixth floor, weren't we?"

"Ding ding. You thought you went up one floor but instead went up two.

Those kinds of stairs make it pretty easy to do if the designer really wants to. Apartments and condo buildings are strange like that. The only way you can know what floor you're even on is through the sign on the lobby. Take off the numbers in an elevator and have someone ride it to the top of a really tall building. Do they know what floor they're on? Don't think so. Switch around the floor labels on the switches and it'll be even worse, at least for someone not used to riding it every day. Hmm, now I've got the urge to try it in another apartment building. Like, we sneak in at night and change stuff around."

Crazy, but just like her. With that, she closes the elevator door, presses the button marked "1", and before long we're getting off the elevator back in the floor where we started.

"Oh wait, why don't we drop by and check out the east lobby for a minute?" Miss Tōko suggests. "Both wings have a lobby on this floor, right?" "Er, yes. It actually takes up the second floor too, with the space. It's like a big hotel receiving—wait a minute, weren't you the one that designed the east lobby?"

"Did I now?" she says in a voice which I can't distinguish from sarcasm and genuine wonderment before she smiles knowingly at me. The central chamber which contains the elevator is connected to lobbies on either side with a corridor, and Miss Tōko is already starting to walk towards the one that connects to the east lobby. I follow her, and it isn't long before we arrive. It's a spacious room, with little of interest in it besides a stairs straight ahead of us that connects it to the second floor catwalk that lines the walls of the room. The state of seemingly perpetual tidiness with which it is kept reminds me of the look of an old Napoleonic ballroom, except dead and empty. The marble floors and the same cream-colored walls that decorate all of the walls we have yet seen in this building certainly complete the image.

"Guess I'll set up here," I hear Miss Tōko murmur to herself. "Perfect place for an emergency spell—" beyond that, her voice lowers to the point that I can no longer hear it. I watch as she takes a knee on the marble floor and let her hands wander on its surface like an archaeologist looking for any lost fossils.

"Um, what are you doing over there, ma'am?"

"Just a little something for later. By the way, did you notice anything weird

when you were going up the stairs? There were signs that it moved, weren't there?"

The stairs...moved? But, it's inside a solid column, which means, what? That moves too?

"I didn't say that the entire column moved. Just the stairs. You would have found the scratch marks if you looked at the corners where the stairs met the wall. Or were you really so scared as to not have your wits about you?" she asks as she continues her strange inspection of the floor.

I hate to say it, but she's right. But it was so dark that I couldn't see the entirety of the stairs, anyway, so I don't think it would have done much good even if I *was* paying attention. "But that's impossible ma'am. Moving that column implies that you'd need nothing short of tearing the entire building down to do it."

"Listen to me when I'm talking, will you? I *did* say it was only the stairs that moved. The entire thing is like a pop-a-point pencil."

"What the heck is a pop-a-point pencil?" As soon as I state this, her hands stop their questing movement and she stands up with a surprising agility.

"Wait a minute. You don't know what a pop-a-point pencil is? What kind of parents brought you up, Kokutō? It's that pencil where there are a lot of sharpened points in cartridges inside. When your lead becomes dull, you take it out and push it in the back like a bazooka, and out comes a new sharpened point without the need for cranking the handle on the classroom sharpener. Maybe they don't sell it nowadays."

I have no idea what she's describing, but I guess I understand the mechanics of it well enough.

"So you're saying that the stairs are being pushed up from below, like a piston mechanism?"

"That's the idea. They probably left half a floor's height on the thing, just to move the spiral. North becomes south and south becomes north. Something's definitely up with it. But we'll leave it for now." She walks again, this time going out the door to the outside, and I follow her lead. As we finally exit the

building, she whispers something to herself, something which I can only barely hear.

“Man, you really don’t know what a pop-a-point pencil is? And they were pretty popular when I was a kid too.

As if life truly wanted to deliver one last sucker punch to our efforts for the day, we arrive at Miss Tōko’s parked car only to find a parking violation ticket stuck to the windshield, for parking in a public thoroughfare. I guess we should have expected it, seeing as the road in front of the apartment was wide, and we were the only ones parked. Guess the traffic cops had nothing better to do.

## **Spiral Paradox - IV**

That night, after finishing up the last of the research I had to do for Miss Tōko, I headed on over to Shiki's house to hang out. It is just past 8pm on the night of November 9, and I find her absent from her home, which by itself, isn't a really out of place event.

Except on the next day, I find she still has not come back.

## **Paradox Spiral - V**

Unwittingly, before either my mind or my body could actually notice, my feet have already brought me to Ryōgi's house. As I step in, I notice that it has not changed its dreariness ever since the last time I set foot in here, the day when I admitted to Ryōgi that I killed my parents. Just before I close the door, I see the sky already darkened, though still somewhat lighted by the faraway setting sun. The hour hand on Ryōgi's bedside clock points to six, and as always, in this quiet space, the incessant ticking of the second hand eventually grows to become an annoyance, and only serves to exacerbate my growing headache.

It's already been nine days since I last saw Ryōgi. In that span, I've spent my time roaming the streets among the hobos and corner boys, all greeting the turn of the months to November with a silent vigil as they go about their duties. I barely ate, only pausing to look at the occasional newspaper or TV display for any news on the discoveries of my parents' bodies. Perhaps because of the depths to which my life has suddenly sunk, I've had a headache that hasn't stopped, and in fact continues to reach a new high every day. On top of that, my body has been steadily weakening, and all the joints in my body have become heavier every time I wake up from a supposedly restive night's sleep.

"What in the hell am I doing to myself?" I whisper to no one as I hug my knees close to me. I was never supposed to come back here. But now, Ryōgi's voice is the one thing I want to hear. I'm scared, and I need someone, anyone's help, and so I unconsciously brought myself here. As I wait in what seems like hours in the darkness of the unlit room, my teeth start chattering lightly, adding to the droning repetition of the ticking clock. It makes me not notice there is anyone in

the room until suddenly the entirety of my sight is bathed in light. It's Ryōgi, who had opened the door without my noticing.

"Enjō? What were you...never mind. I don't think I really want to know what you like to do alone in the middle of the dark," says the voice of the girl clad in a red jacket over a white kimono. She doesn't even sound like she's surprised at my being here. Nothing about her has changed: from the hair with its tip at her shoulders, to her deep, dark eyes, to the tone of her voice. It's still the Ryōgi that I know. "Still, you couldn't have come at a better time."

She approaches her bed and places the long bag she's holding on top of it. Then she opens the door to the room she never used or opened while I was here, and from it produces a wooden box of about the same length as the bag on her bed.

"Sorry, but whatever you gotta say, it's gonna have to wait until I finish. I just can't wait to put this bad boy together." She unties the knot on the satchel, revealing a naked sword blade inside. In a manner that tells me she's done this many times before, she opens the wooden box and retrieves a sword scabbard and grip from it, as well as an oval shaped object that must be the guard. "Oh man, the scabbard sleeve ain't fitting. And this is the only one I have, too," she says with dissatisfaction as she slowly transforms the blade from its nakedness to a fine example of a katana by assembling it, affixing different things to the blade tang. After she's done and has looked upon it with some pride, she puts it on top of the bed and turns to face me again. "Alright. You wanted to talk, right?"

In contrast to how delighted her voice is, her expression is still nothing more than the plain indifference she has given me all this time. I try to speak at first, but nothing comes out. I just want someone to help me. And I realize that nothing has changed. Everything is as it was when Ryōgi first saved me in that alley, but now I can't remember what I wanted to be saved from.

"I don't fucking know. I've done things, things are happening, and I don't know," I say. Ryōgi says nothing, only listening as she continues to look at me. I don't think I have any other choice except to continue. "When I was wandering in the city today, I saw my mom. At first, I thought it was just someone who looked like her. But then I followed her, until she went inside the same apartment building I used to live in. It doesn't make any fucking sense

anymore!” I declare, my shivering becoming worse with every word. Ryōgi stands up.

“So long story short, you think she’s alive. You’ve seen nothing in the news, so hey, it might be possible.”

“No! I killed her, and my dad too. I’m sure of it. It’s the ones that are alive that are fake!” I say with as much vigor as I can muster, as if shouting it will make it real somehow. I don’t know if I truly believe what I’m saying. What did I see, then? I remember leaving the house a picturesque image of a blood-drenched nightmare, and yet who did I see go back into it? “Must be my mistake. How about an idea so we can solve it? Why don’t we go there to make sure?”

“Wh—”

“We go there, we knock on the door, see if anyone’s inside, ask. That way we’ll know for sure if they’re alive or not. I’m serious!” As soon as she says that, Ryōgi wastes no time. She immediately stands up and retrieves a sheathed knife from her table, putting it into her jacket’s inside pocket, and then sheathes a second one in a leather scabbard, tucking it into her kimono’s sash. The viciousness of the blades belies the atmosphere of Ryōgi’s casual attitude, which almost feels like she’s just going out to buy some smokes. It seems she’s determined to go with or without me. I was planning on objecting, but seeing her determined state of mind makes me resolve to at least not let her go alone. And so I follow her out of the room.

“Feel like driving a motorcycle, Enjō?”

“Somehow, I feel like I don’t have a choice.”

“Good. I left one in the parking lot, so we’ll use that.” We walk hurriedly towards the underground parking lot of the building. While I’m surprised that a building this small has such a facility, I’m more startled by the motorcycle that Ryōgi shows me: A large, heavy-looking Harley with an attached sidecar, which Ryōgi proceeds to get on. Driven on by her lack of hesitation, I position myself on the motorcycle, start the engine, and start us on the way to the apartment where I used to live over a month ago.

We arrive at the high rise a little later than I expected, in some part due to the fact that I'm not really used to driving motorcycles as big as the one Ryōgi provided. The November nighttime air is so cold it's almost unbearable, and driving in an open vehicle didn't serve to alleviate it one bit. But through all that, we finally arrive at the circular apartment, tall enough that it seems like it could reach the moon. Its strange construction—circular, and actually being two buildings connected—helped it stand out from its much more plain, four-corner neighbors. My former house is located on the fourth floor of the east building. From what I know, the west building never had any residents. There aren't a lot of people living there to begin with, so I guess they just never got around to using it. I did hear a lot of people wanted to buy, but the owner was a picky one, and not at all social, so he only filled more or less half of the units in the thing. Apparently my dad knew him, so my family got in fairly easily as a favor, I suppose.

"Well, this is it," I say to Ryōgi riding in the sidecar. She casts her eyes upward at the building, looking suspiciously like she's seen some ghostly apparition on one of the windows.

"What is up with this place," is the only thing she says. I leave the bike parked in the street in front of the apartment, and I lead Ryōgi inside the grounds. A concrete wall surrounds the entirety of the premises like one of those bad community elemenatries. The circular shape of the building makes it so that it doesn't take up a lot of space, but the grounds with its surrounding flora takes up much of the lot. Bisecting it is the paved walkway leading from the street to the building itself. Wordlessly, Ryōgi follows my lead as we enter. Inside, we can immediately spot the large central column that dominates the structure like an ancient monument. Within it is the elevator, and around the elevator shaft is the spiral stairs that hardly anyone uses. I push the "up" button beside the elevator door to call it.

Somewhere, a clock's second hand ticks. Something doesn't feel right. My heart is beating at a rate much higher than it does normally, and my breathing is labored. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I mean, I'm about to pay a visit to the family I killed. That's hardly a recipe for relaxation.

The elevator arrives.

The door opens.

I go inside.

Shiki follows.

I push the button for the fourth floor.

A deep, mechanical sound can be heard as the elevator begins its ascent, a sound that I'd gotten used to hearing a long time ago.

“It’s twisting,” says Ryōgi to no one in particular. The elevator stops on the fourth floor. I get out and immediately head for the hallway directly in front of us, leading to the east building. Ryōgi continues to follow me in silence as I take a hard left, following the corridor’s direction. Now I face the hallway outside the rooms of the east building, with the left hand side all having doors to their respective units, and the right hand side an open view of the outside world. A chest height wall is situated on the right side to prevent any nasty accidents. All of them are lit by the glow of the orange fluorescent lights on one half, and the other half the soft blue of the moonlight from outside.

“We just go straight ahead to the end of this hallway to get to my house.” I start walking again. The whole place is quiet, save for the little noises that you can hear from inside the units, but it’s all background noise that your brain tends to filter out, and besides that, you never meet anyone in the hallways anyway. At last we arrive at the last room as the hallway terminates, and I stop my feet right in front of the door.

Are we really doing this? My hand doesn’t move to reach anything, and my vision seems to blur for a moment when I look at the doorknob. Oh wait. That’s right. I have to ring the doorbell first. It’s an absolute rule, even with the key I have. If I don’t do it, mom’ll be scared shitless again. It’s all because of that one time when some debt collectors forcibly entered. Now, we have to ring the doorbell to allay mom’s fears. As I remember this, my hand hovers over the button.

Ryōgi stops me.

“How about we not ring the doorbell and just go inside, Enjō?”

“What the hell? Do you plan on just barging in?”

“This is your house, isn’t it? Besides, we ring the doorbell, I wouldn’t be able to see the trick, and that would be too bad. Now give me the key.” Ryōgi abruptly grabs the key that I produce from my pocket and inserts it into the doorknob, giving it one turn.

The door opens, and inside I can hear the low hum of the television. Someone is inside.

The sounds of a conversation. The buzz of words. My dad blaming the problems of life on my mom and the world. My mom hearing all of it in one ear and out the other one, nodding along to everything he says. The daily life of someone called Tomoe Enjō.

Ryōgi makes her way inside silently, and I shadow her steps. We exit the hallway, and open the door leading to the living room where the noise originates. Inside is a cheap looking table, quite unfit for the how good the room looks. Or how good it would look if it was swept regularly and the trash was taken out. As it stands now, bags of trash fill its corners like necessary furniture.

And in the middle of this entire scene are my parents.

“Jesus, is Tomoe not home yet? It’s eight o’ clock, for crying out loud. He got off the clock an hour ago! Where the fuck is that asshole playing around?”

“Who knows?”

“It’s because you spoil him that he acts like we ain’t his parents. That goddamn punk better start putting some money into the household or he’s gonna get his ass pounded. Whose house does he think he’s living in anyway?”

“Who knows?”

What...what the hell is this?

Both my dad who hides behind the image of the fucking big man of the house even though he’s a coward at heart, and my mom who serves as his unflinching yes man are both alive. The two people I killed are continuing on with life as if nothing had happened. But that isn’t even the most suspicious thing about this. They’re not even turning to look at me and Ryōgi standing in the doorway, visible to all.

“What time do you get home?” Ryōgi whispers into my ear.

“Around nine,” I answer back, my voice stunned to incredulity.

“Man, an hour? Guess we got no choice but to wait.”

“Ryōgi, what the fuck?” I whisper, thinking the two would hear us.

“Explain this bullshit to me.” Her indifference finally makes me angry, but she casts me an annoyed glance in response.

“We didn’t ring the doorbell or knock, so they’re not treating us like guests. We didn’t trigger anything that fires up their predetermined response. So they continue their act thinking no one’s actually come.” Her observation finished, Ryōgi walks to the room behind us, across the hall from the living room.

My room.

After some hesitation, I follow her while trying to avoid meeting my parents’ gaze. There I could do nothing but stand and wait. Ryōgi chooses a spot on the wall to lean on, and waits like that in the room where the lights are off. But waiting for what, exactly? Nothing less than myself, Tomoe Enjō, and his return. And so I wait for me in the place where I committed murder. Not the most normal of times for me. Time passes simultaneously fast and slow for me, an eternity committed to a second, an hour where my sense of reality seems to slip away as the second hand on a clock ticks away somewhere beyond my reach.

And then at last, I hear the door open. Finally, I’ve come home. A sense of relief and dread at the same time, two paradoxical emotions combine as I watch another me enter the house without a word, not venturing to converse with my parents, and enter my room in silence. All of it is the same: The wavy red-dyed hair, the body and face that made everyone call me a girl up until junior high, the sullen look that cursed the world, and the deep breath taken upon entering the seclusion of the room; a meditative act, almost a ritual, that seemed to will all the troubles away.

Tomoe-the-other pays as much attention to Ryōgi and me standing by the wall as he would invisible specters. He lays out the mattress. My mind is blank as I watch Tomoe Enjō fall asleep, even though I’ve seen all of this before. I know what happens next. The sounds of an argument fill the room across the hall. It’s

my mom, raising her voice to dad in what must be the first time ever. Then inhuman screaming. Both of them, baying like wild dogs. Then the unpleasant sound of a hard and metallic object making impact with something fleshy. After that, only my mom's desperate breathing can be heard through the door. Footsteps, repeating over and over. The clock ticking and ticking.

"No," I whisper, though I know it won't change anything. After all, I've seen this before.

The door slides open, and Tomoe dares to open his eyes for a peek, and he sees the silhouette of his mother holding a broad kitchen knife in one hand.

"Die, Tomoe." Her voice detached, feeling nothing, but perhaps this isn't true. After all, Tomoe can't see her face against the light, but now Tomoe can see. Mom is crying. And yet, she goes on to stab him as if possessed with reckless strength, each stab strangely in time with the sound of the second hand's progress around the face of the clock. In the stomach, the chest, the neck, both arms and legs, the thighs, each finger, both ears, through the nose, a stab on each eye, and finally, on the forehead. It is then that the knife breaks, and mom puts the broken blade on her own neck, stabs, then twists. Both she and the knife fall to the floor in a dull sound that nevertheless manages an echo in the room.

Then nothing. Only the eternally reverberating sound of the ticking, growing louder and louder in my mind like a mocking tone. This is—"a bad dream." That became real at last. Or whatever level of reality this is. The sight makes me sick to my stomach, but I am delayed from any further thoughts when I hear the sound of a kimono fluttering as it moves. Ryōgi moves to leave the room.

"If your curiosity is sated, then we can go. We have no business left here."

"No business?! A person just—I just died here!"

"Did you really? Look closely and you'll see there's not a drop of blood on them. They'll just wake up right as rain in the morning. It's a cycle where they're born in the morning and die at night. Get a grip on yourself, Enjō. You're the one alive. That—" she points to the corpse "—is the one with a lot more holes in his body."

I turn my head to look at the tragedy one more time, and just like Ryōgi said, no blood on any of them even though there should have been gallons of the stuff.

“What, how—”

“Hey, I’m as clueless as you as to how and why someone would do something like this, but at any rate, we’ve got nothing more to do here. C’mon, let’s go to the next one.” Ryōgi walks to the hallway and towards the door leading outside. I call out to her, though she doesn’t turn around to acknowledge me.

“What do you mean ‘next?’ Where the hell are you going, Ryōgi?”

“Durr. To the place where you really lived, Enjō.” She says, and continues walking, the briskness of her action dispelling the confusion I feel, at least temporarily.

At first, having followed her all the way back to the central hall, I thought Ryōgi would get on the elevator. Instead, she goes behind it, to the opposite side of the hall, where the corridor leading to the west building lies. Without any attempt at solemnity, she passes through the corridor and goes into the west building hallway, constructed similarly to its counterpart. I suppose I shouldn’t have expected any less. I realize—even though I lived here for over half a year—that I’ve never really seen anyone from the east building go to the west building. It’s like some kind of common courtesy.

We walk through the hallway, the open air to our right letting in drafts of biting, cold air that tells me how late it is. I glance at my watch, displaying the time as around ten o’clock. As far as I know, no one lives in the west building, which is probably why only the minimum amount of lights are actually turned on in this part, and no light nor any indication of movement seems to be slipping in the cracks under the doors to each unit. Guided mostly by the moonlight, Ryōgi presses on through the barely-lit hall.

406. 407. 408. 409. When she reaches the last unit, 410, she suddenly halts, looks at the door, and starts to talk.

“I went here on a hunch, based on a really small observation, really. Even though you said you lived in 405, I remembered that Mikiya said your name last. He’s not the kind of guy to mix the order of names around. So I thought that the Enjō family must be living in the last room of the fourth floor, room 410 in other words.”

“What...”

“You told me some time ago that elevator didn’t work for a while, right? It only worked when all of the residents were here already, like somebody gave it a signal. The entire thing is a trick to displace the exit by turning the elevator, to fool you where north and south is. The fact that it’s circular and it makes a loud sound when it goes up hides the trick. It’s also the reason why the second floor isn’t used. It needs the height of a floor so that it can spin around a half circle for the trick.”

Displacing the exit? That sounds like a load of bullshit, but what if it’s true? After all, I wouldn’t know. The only thing I know is that when I get off the elevator, the corridor in front of me is the one that leads to the east building. I didn’t question it since it seemed so obvious. If what she’s saying is true, then I’ve been mixing things up, and I just didn’t notice due to everything being the same. Whichever corridor you go to, you end up taking a hard left to end up in the building’s hallway, and there aren’t any numbers on the doors, so you wouldn’t know the difference.

“Then, this is my house?”

Yep. The house you were in for a month before the elevator started working, to be exact. After that, you were living in the funhouse we’ve just been to. Now that I think about it, the stairs must be moving too, or else this whole thing wouldn’t work. They’re spiral stairs, aren’t they?”

I can’t even bother to give her a nod. “But all of that can’t be true. Normally, you’d notice that shit.” I retort, but Ryōgi, as always with the considerable amount of composure she can bring to bear, refutes me.

“Can you still call this place normal after what we just saw in 405? This place is an enclosed space. All of the buildings you see from outside are the same four-angle mid rises with no great difference from anywhere you look. All the walls that partition the place are some kind of strange color with small patterns on them that you don’t notice but your mind processes and remembers. There aren’t any small inconsistencies, so your mind lets the obvious ones slide. It’s not the same as Tōko’s, but there’s one hell of a ward in here.” She puts a hand on the doorknob. “I’m letting it rip, Enjō. It’s the homecoming half a year in the

making,” she says, a note of glee intruding in her voice.

She opens the door. There’s no turning back now.

The inside of 410 is consumed by a thick darkness such that both of us can’t really see more than a foot in front of us. In my head, the ticking resumes once again, and my body, and all my joints, reclaim their previous heaviness.

“Where are the goddamn lights? Oh, here they are,” I hear Ryōgi say somewhere in the dark. In a second, a light burns brightly above.

I gulp. But I am no longer surprised. Somehow, I knew it would be here.

“Looks to be half a year since they died,” says Ryōgi in a voice that implies no surprise in her as well. Though I know we should be at least somewhat astonished, for the living room we have entered contains two wasted corpses. What few dry skin remains is hanging on their clearly visible bones. Most of the flesh has fallen off, dry decaying on their own in the floor like a pile of garbage. They look like bodies dumped in a landfill and left to rot, with eye sockets as black and empty as a cave, and faces that no one in good confidence can possibly put an identity to. Except me. They are what remain of Takayuki and Kaede Enjō, the parents I killed a month ago for the sake of one bad dream. But as Ryōgi says, it looks like it’s been longer than a month since they died. And then there is the other Enjō family that still exists on the other side.

It’s all a paradox that I can no longer muster the will to resolve. Like Ryōgi, I stand here in the room, thinking and doing nothing except stare at the bodies, as if by looking at them, I could divine the exact time and date like a perverse clock. Compared to the dream that I see every night made real earlier, this is more final, more conclusive, so much so that it doesn’t even hold any surprises for me. A meaningless, worthless death for my parents.

Even so, I can’t seem to take my eyes off the sight of the decay. I have the acute feeling of someone wanting to feel emotional without actually being able to. I want to be disgusted, to be startled at the very least, but no dice.

The sound of the front door opening intrudes on my thoughts.

“Spoiling for a fight, eh?” says Ryōgi, smiling upon hearing the distinct noise.

She draws the knife from inside her jacket, and in one smooth motion unsheathes the blade. At that same moment, someone enters the living room without us hearing his voice or even his footfalls. His face is a middle-aged man that could have been anyone you passed by on the street, but containing a hollow expression that reeked of imminent danger. As soon as I think I sort of recognize him, he rushes forward to attack us.

But that's Ryōgi's cue to meet his steps and dispatch him easily with one stab of the knife. A second later, another one—wait, no, three—no, four people pile inside the room, clearly with the same intent, but Ryōgi wastes no time. Moving towards them, she slashes and stabs with a dancer's grace, reminding me of the spectacle on the night we first met, now made deadlier with the knife in her hand. In a few moments, it is over, and the entrance to the living room is soon covered with four corpses. She grabs my hand and urges me to go.

"Well, the residents have clearly expressed their opinion," she says in a hurried tone. "Let's get the hell out of here." I guess I can still count on her to be cool-headed right until the end. I'm still in a fair daze from seeing my parent's corpses, but I obviously can't ignore what's going on, and it makes me let go of her hand.

"What the hell, Ryōgi?! Why are you—"

"They're not human. They're human corpses, that much is obvious. But they're just puppets with a death wish. It's fucking sick. In any case, less talk, more run, run, run." I see her face colored for the first time with a look of utter contempt, but at what exactly, I have neither the time nor the composure to divine. Ryōgi runs ahead, while I struggle to go through the pile of corpses that Ryōgi made, observing that they seem to be a collection of adults and children that, to my eyes at least, look like a family.

I burst through the front door that Ryōgi left open and come out into the hallway to find five more of these so-called "corpses" on the floor. No blood, like the four she left inside, though their injuries are severe. I suppose this proves they're not really human, like she said.

In the gap of time that we were separated, Ryōgi has already travelled to what looks to be just in front of unit 408, preoccupied with another of these corpses.

Watching her from here, I can finally come to grips with how overwhelmingly skilled she is. The movements of her enemies aren't dulled or delayed, but violent and human-like when they press their assault.

But it isn't enough to deal with Ryōgi, who dives and spins through the press of people, her movements almost too fast to follow. Each slash, each stab, each swing of the knife that cuts through bone, muscle, and sinew makes her look less like a girl, and more a force of nature, a white-clad reaper mowing down a path back to the central lobby. Despite the mass of rapid movement blocking most of my view, I see the other end of the hallway, with the light of the lobby spilling in from the right. Shadowed by this light, a black figure stands in the hallway.

At first, with the stillness of his posture, I take him for some sort of black sculpture, but I soon realize he is a man, wearing a black coat. He seems different somehow from the corpses Ryōgi is dispatching. A moment after seeing him, I freeze up all the way to my fingertips, unable to move like a puppet that lost its strings, and I am overwhelmed with dread.

I should not have seen him. No, that's wrong. We shouldn't have come here at all, so that we could not have met him and the spectral placidity that he casts over the entire place; the stillness that wraps around him like a tailor-made cloak.

## Chapter 11

The man stands unmoving in the exit of the hallway, blocking the one narrow corridor into the central lobby. The black long coat he wears wraps him in a shadow that casts aside the moonlight, making him look darker than the night sky. He only watches mutely as the girl in white dances and swirls to eliminate the opposition. As if feeling the gaze affixed on her, Shiki Ryōgi stops dead in her tracks the moment she cuts down the last of the corpses, the distance between the man and Shiki when she finally notices him less than five wide steps. That she allowed herself to close to that distance to someone without her even being aware of it makes her lose concentration, if only for a few moments.

But that's not the only thing about him Shiki notices. He gives away nothing, leaves nothing to be read on his face or any small movements, which are either so minute as to be unnoticeable, or else not present entirely. And it is this fact that troubles Shiki. A bead of sweat pours trickles down her brow, a chink in her otherwise calm façade.

"Ironic. By all rights this should have taken place after all of this was completed." The weight of his voice is overwhelming, almost enough to force submission with just a word. He advances a step toward Shiki, a step that left him vulnerable with an opening that Shiki could have exploited, but finds that she can't. She knows this man means hostile intent, and at worst intends to kill both her and Tomoe Enjō, and yet her feet seem trapped in place, unable to will them to move. The reason is quite simple: Though Shiki hides it quite well, she is in fact quite worried when she realizes that her Arcane Eyes of Death Perception finds a line on everything... except the man; no trace of the lines of

death, the mark of entropic finality that everything and everyone carried, and she could will into vision any time she wished.

Shiki focuses on the man, just as Tōko taught her, trying to envision the lines harder than she'd ever willed before. Though her mind strains and groans at the force of will, for a moment she finally sees...something else. Square in the man's chest is a mark, a line swirling outwards like a child's drawing to form what seems like a hollow, empty hole.

"I know you," she says, the venom in her voice clearer than anything. Because for an instant when she sees the strange mark on him, she remembers a fragment of an old memory. A vision that takes her back to that rain drenched night of two years ago, if only for less than a second. The man replies.

"Yes. Two years is far too long a time." The heaviness of his voice forces its way into Shiki's ears as he gently taps his temple with a finger. There, stretching from the forehead to above his left ear, is the scar from a cut, the same wound that Shiki had inflicted on him two years ago.

"You're—"

"Sōren Alaya. It is the name of the one who will kill you," the man declares, his face still a picture of stoic calm.

The greatcoat that hangs down from his shoulders has the unusual effect of making him look like some archaic sorcerer. The sleeves move as he slowly raises his arm, pointing it towards Shiki in a motion that makes her think that he would attempt to seize her neck, though he is still well enough away for that. She adjusts her stance in response, widening the spacing between her legs just so, and she readies her off-hand below her knife's pommel, ready to add any additional thrusting force when needed.

"Your welcome is in poor taste," Shiki mocks. "What the hell is this apartment all about?" She shouts this, in part perhaps to contain the first genuine fear that she has ever felt in her life. In a rumbling tone that is more indulgent than acquiescent, Alaya answers.

"You will not find any grand designs or vast-reaching conspiracies, if that is what you are looking for. It is what it is: a product of my own will." "Then I take it this business of recurring lives is all just a harmless hobby of yours, right?"

Her gaze at the man is as unmoving as he is as they exchange words.

“Though at present incomplete, I have created a world that lasts for only a day. However, life and death alone is not enough to describe a ryōgi, and composed as it is with people of different lives and deaths, it is certainly not enough to contain you within it, not yet at any rate. The cycle of death and rebirth is incomplete. It is, however, descriptive of the spiral of conflict, for to the Yin, I offered death, and to Yang, life.”

“So that’s why the west building is full of death, while the opposite end is normal. You mages sure do bother with the weirdest, most meaningless rituals.”

“As I have said, this is no grand design.” Alaya offers a glance at the boy still standing dumbfounded behind Shiki. No words well up from inside Tomoe Enjō, and he can only look at the shadowy figure staring at him. “For there is naught but one state of being for any man. Dead and living cannot exist together. This place is a paradox where none can find themselves saved by the comfort of the consensus.” Mentally casting aside Enjō, he returns his attention to Shiki. “This is but a simple experiment. I only wished to see if men meet their end the same way in every iteration. All men die, but the origin also tells us that the death is predestined. Whether the result is a burnt lump of flesh, or complete incineration, a man that dies by fire does so; whether his struggle is hard or he surrenders, a man killed by family does so. Perhaps he avoids the first, or the second opportunity that death attempts. But in time, it will occur, and only our tenacity determines how long we live. But a man who dies a thousand times...well, perhaps there a deviation, however slight, can occur in the hidden law of chance. But it seems it is not so, at least not through two hundred repetitions.”

He recounts it with all the clinical dryness of a doctor. Shiki doesn’t know how he does it, nor does she particularly care, but all she knows is that this man is making the Enjō’s family needlessly kill each other every day in an “experiment” he doesn’t even seem to be too excited about. Something inside her is telling her to kill him right here, and the thought comforts her somewhat.

“So they start the morning the same way, and play out a sick drama of their last day on Earth the rest of the way? An interesting, if sick, hobby. And I don’t think the greater scientific community is on the edge of their seat for the result.”

“Do not make the mistake in assuming that the choosing of these families were in any way random. They were chosen because they were already fallen, broken. Their pitiful lives would have come to the same conclusion given time. I merely fabricated a hastier end that they would have acted out in a long span of pain, suffering, and misunderstanding, whether that be months or years.” There is no pride, nor any resigned sadness, in what he says. Only the curiosity of an observer.

“Call me crazy, but something tells me they wouldn’t agree with you, though. Look at this place. Floors bent slightly enough to not be seen, but enough to fuck with your perception of balance; illumination that’s just dark enough coupled with a paint job with patterns that drill their way into your head. Anyone’s bound to go slowly insane inside of this funhouse, even without the magic.”

“Fine praise, but lain at the wrong feet. It is to Aozaki that you must direct your words at, though she crafted it unknowing of its purpose.” He chances another step forward. Shiki aligns her knife toward the base of Alaya’s neck, and before the time to talk is dispensed, she asks him the one final question hanging on her mind.

“Why do you want to kill me, Alaya?” At first he seems to have no intent to answer. But in a moment, he mouths an entirely unexpected sentence. “Kirie Fujō and Fujino Asagami performed quite poorly.”

“What did you say?” Taken aback by names she did not expect, Shiki is at a momentary loss for words. In that moment of hesitation that Shiki let slip, Alaya closes the distance with another hostile step.

“I hold the cracked mirror up to you, and you see Kirie Fujō, a woman who thrived on death only to cling to life.” He says the name of the woman who was once consumed by debilitating disease, not knowing when she would die. An individual who lived through a longing for death. She held the trait of having one soul, yet two bodies, inseparably twinned.

And then, there is Shiki Ryōgi, the name of the girl who can feel alive only through facing death, holding it close to her like a beloved trinket, but never letting it consume her. She held the trait of having two souls, yet one body, their link now definitively broken.

“The image in the mirror shifts, and you see Fujino Asagami, the woman that pleasures herself through the medium of death.” He says the name of the girl who felt nothing, and because of it, was stunted in her understanding of the emanations of the world beyond her. Only through the extremes of murder could she hope to gain the pleasure of dominion and the joy of life. Her dangerous abilities were sealed by the same dynasty through which she inherited it.

And then, there is Shiki Ryōgi, the name of the girl could only empathize with others through the act of mutual murder, risking death, and fighting it. Her honed skills are granted to her by the same dynasty through which she inherited it.

“On the precipice of death, Kirie Fujō chose the end, while you chose life. In the taking of lives, Fujino Asagami took pleasure, while you gave it weight and meaning. Surely your similarities and your differences as murderers have not escaped your attention.” Shocked into inaction, Shiki can only look as the darkness of the man approaches her. “Two years ago, I failed. I did not realize that what I needed were different individuals with the same origin. Rejoice, Shiki Ryōgi, for both of Kirie and Fujino were sacrifices made for you.”

His voice contains the first indication of passion, a voice that can barely contain the joy he thinks he deserves. In contrast, the willworker’s face is still as solid as a stone, seemingly suffering from an invisible burden on his shoulders.

“There is but one last piece to play, though there is little I can do should Aozaki read the move. Enjō Tomoe is an unexpected blessing, having stumbled back here from where my spells could not compel you to return.” “I’ve had enough. It’s clear you’re the one responsible for all this. Only one thing left on the agenda now,” Shiki murmurs, excitement keen in her voice. She tightens her grip on the knife’s handle. The man holds his advance and points a finger behind Shiki, where the corpses of the dolls that confronted her lie. For a fraction of a second in this act, the shadows seem to draw closer to Alaya in an illusion that throws Shiki off just a bit.

*“The void itself is your base impulse, your origin. Cast your gaze into that abyss, and find yourself.”*

Within that declaration resides an emanation of truth, a lacing of magic. Though it buries itself deep inside Shiki, she nevertheless readies herself, and

shouts,

“Out of the way or die!”

Then like an arrow drawn back and loosed, she leaps forth with an animalistic burst of speed and murder the only thing on her mind.

The distance separating them cannot be more than three meters, and there is little room to run in any direction other than forwards and backwards in the narrow hallway, which is why both of them are not even considering any sort of retreat. With the speed of Shiki’s leap, it won’t take more than a second for her to close the distance. She holds the knife beside her hip, aiming to thrust it inside the man’s guts.

But the mage has other plans. He need only speak the words.

“*Fugu*.” The air around him ripples, and Shiki is stopped dead in her tracks.

“*Kongō*.” He holds a hand out. Shiki sees a distinct line begin to form on the floor below.

“*Dakatsu*.” At the uttering of the word, Shiki feels even the very air around her halt.

Shiki staggers at her sudden halt, as if her body had just been filled with lead. The line that her Arcane Eyes allowed her to see being formed moments earlier is now complete, shaping itself as three thin circles spaced apart from one another, radiating outwardly from him like the orbit of heavenly bodies around the sun. The outermost circle, being wider than the hallway, instead begins to cling to the walls as a crude design would. Shiki realized the trap she had fallen in, her movement having stopped the moment she stepped into the boundary of the outermost circle. Now she is as a white butterfly trapped helplessly in a web.

“I shall take your body.” The mage advances, the ghostly dark smoothness of his movement a juxtaposition against Shiki’s earlier white blur of a charge. Now facing Shiki squarely at her front, she stands helpless as the man’s greatcoat rustles in the wind. In the speed of events, it is only now that her mind catches up and truly begins to grasp the notion of Alaya as a dangerous enemy. He extends his left hand toward Shiki, palm open as if meaning to crush Shiki’s face in a vise grip.

“Don’t come any closer!” Shiki shouts, the words coming out in staggered breaths borne out of some unseen labor. But the same force that had paralyzed her now only galvanizes her force of will. When Alaya’s fingertips begin to touch her face, she recoils to avoid them, and through an amount of effort that even she does not realize she can display, she momentarily breaks free from the invisible chains that bind her and manages to move her knife hand in a violent swing downwards. Alaya’s left hand is cut from the wrist—

“*Taiten*,” he says, and the hand that was falling for a fraction of a second does not complete its descent. Shiki saw the entire thing, saw the blade cut clean through the wrist like a hot knife through butter, but now she also sees no trace of a wound on that very same wrist.

“*Chōgyō*.” Now it is his right hand that moves, and it moves unexpectedly fast, almost as if he was anticipating what Shiki just did. And this time, it succeeds in grabbing her face, and with that purchase he lifts her up in the air. Shiki tries to speak, but her voice is strained again by the same force that made it difficult for her to speak earlier, and it comes out only in muffled and choked noises. From that hand, Shiki feels an indescribably cold sensation that goes under her skin toward the depths of her mind before slipping through her spine and spreading to each pore in her body. And for the first time in her life, she feels the last, desperate stirrings of one who knows in a moment that she is about to die.

“There is much yet for you to learn. Within my left hand are sarira, and not even the Arcane Eyes of Death Perception can see its weak links. A simple cut will not wound me,” he explains as his hand continues to press upon Shiki’s face like a machine, not slackening for a moment, nails digging deeper and deeper. He studies her with a look almost akin to scholarly curiosity. She knows that any rash action and his hand will force what strength he is holding back to crush her head.

“I will not die,” he continues, “for I have awakened to my origin of quiescence. It rules me. How would you kill what is already at rest?” Shiki’s eyes dart around frantically, making use of the minute field of vision still afforded her by trying to find anything...just one of the lines of death on his body, however faint. Desperately trying to will away both the cold fear moving within her, as well as the pain of the continuous pressure applied to her face, she searches for an

opening. But before that happens, the mage comes to a conclusion.

“I would take your body. But perhaps I do not need the head.” Suddenly, Alaya channels a decisive, crushing force through his hand. Shiki can hear the groan of her skull and jaw starting to break. Her eyes widen as she looks and looks. There! Faint, but it is there in his right arm. Acting fast, Shiki pours all of her remaining strength to cutting that line, and it works. The arm is cut.

Alaya only grunts, but does retreat a few steps. The cut arm, from elbow to hand, still stuck to Shiki’s face, but she throws it to the side and leaps back to withdraw. She takes a knee when she determines the distance between her and Alaya’s orbiting rings to be generous enough. She looks down on the ground and gasps for air violently, both the pain and the effort of maintaining her faint vision of the lines becoming a strain too much to bear. After a pause, Alaya speaks.

“It is possible I underestimated those Eyes. The scene you made in the hospital should have given me all the information I needed. Entropy. Whether something is alive or dead makes no difference if those Eyes and the lines act on entropy. Even for someone of my origin, something still binds me to back to the spiral. And I wonder...how long until you even see the lines on my left hand, and it becomes vulnerable?” Seemingly paying no mind to his severed arm, he continues. “Those Eyes are wasted and a liability on you. You will be restrained before I can destroy them.”

He renews his advance with one step forward, but Shiki has long been staring at the three circles surrounding him, trying to divine a key to victory there.

“You would have been better served backing off when you had the chance,” Shiki warns, shifting her knife into a reverse edge-out grip. “Don’t think I haven’t learned a thing or six about wards. See, the thing about wards is they’re arbitrary boundaries, like the one those Shugendō weirdos supposedly slap on Mount Ōmine to keep out the womenfolk and their temptations. Can’t do shit about something inside it, ‘cause it’s the wards that keep something out. In other words, if the line is gone, it loses its meaning.”

At that, Shiki takes her knife and plunges the knife downwards to the ground, striking fugu, the outermost circle of Alaya’s quickly approaching protective wards, whereupon it fades and disappears, “killed” by Shiki.

“A foolish observation,” the mage says in rebuke, but even so, he quickens his steps. But this time, having reduced Alaya’s barriers to two, Shiki is ready. And the mage hadn’t considered that totality to which Shiki’s Arcane Eyes can apply. To think that it could even kill something formless and lifeless like a ward formed by the Art is something beyond even his most pessimistic predictions. And so now, even his movement is hurried. “However, there are two wards left.”

“Slow on the uptake, aren’t we? Weren’t you listening? Your gimmick is done.” Still in a kneeling position, Shiki places her free hand behind her back to withdraw something tucked within her kimono’s sash. It is the second knife she had taken with her. As soon as she draws it, she flicks it with surprising speed towards Alaya. Like a stone skipping above the waterline, it flies just above the floor, singing through the air and piercing the second circular ward, then the third and final one, bouncing just once over the floor just once to gain altitude as it goes after the mage’s head.

Alaya’s surprising alacrity manages to save him from a direct hit, but Shiki’s violence and speed of action surprises even him. The blade travels further down the hallway before settling on the floor. Despite his timely evasion, the knife still seems to have passed through an ear, cutting it clean, whereupon blood and meat and other non-descript fluids are visible.

The mage grunts in pain, not from the injury in his ear, but from the shock of impact of something hitting his body full on, a white mass that his attention can’t quite yet parse after the suddenness of the knife. By the time he realizes it is Shiki who hit him, the duel is already decided.

Shiki had delivered a shoulder tackle with all the speed and brutality she could muster—enough to break at least a few bones—before she deftly maneuvers her knife in a thrust towards Alaya’s center of mass.

The mage coughs blood in little droplets, grains of sand pouring out of his mouth to stain the floor and Shiki’s white kimono. Shiki draws the knife out, red blood tarnishing its otherwise silver shimmer in the moonlight. Sparing no time, she immediately puts her free hand behind the pommel of the weapon to augment the strength of her next blow, and then brings the blade up to stab Alaya’s neck as hard as she can in a final coup de grace, though the victor is clear. The reason is simple—

“You’re persistence will not serve you well in hell, Shiki.”

—Her enemy isn’t dead yet.

“Fuck! Why—” she shouts, though only finishes in her thoughts. Why? Why aren’t you dead? The mage maintains his characteristic dour face, with the notable exception of his eyes, gleaming with satisfaction. If eyes could smile, his are certainly doing so.

“I have lived for two hundred years on this Earth, and not even the Arcane Eyes of Death Perception will lay that span low so instantly. Entropy already acts on me, faster than you might know, but if that is the price that must be paid to capture you, then it will be so.”

The duel is already decided. His left hand, fist clenched, flies toward Shiki, impacting her midsection with a force that she is sure can crack concrete. She is knocked clean off the ground a few inches, coughing up as much blood as she had caused Alaya to earlier. Shiki hears herself retching, violent and miserable, and realizes that a number of her ribs are broken, and at least some of the organs it protected are damaged, before losing consciousness. In the end, though possessing the power of the Arcane Eyes and an affinity for combat bred into her, her body remains as fragile as any average girl. She would have fainted with even half the strength of Alaya’s punch.

The mage seizes Shiki by the midsection with the one hand he has left and throws her against the wall of the hallway in an act that is probably sufficient to break all of her major bones. But that doesn’t happen. Instead, the wall seems to swallow Shiki, letting her sink and drown into it as if it were water.

It is only then, after Shiki vanishes wholly, that the mage deems it fit to lower his outstretched arm. Shiki’s knife is still stuck to his neck, and his eyes seem to lose their fearful intimidation. Seconds pass, but the black greatcoat does not move.

The mage’s body is dead.

## **Spiral Paradox - V**

The morning of November 10 comes, and still no sign of Shiki coming back to her room.

She has a habit of not locking her door when she goes out, but lately she's actually been locking it like she's supposed to, which is why I can't even get myself inside and I have to be content to sit out here in the hallway like this for hours waiting for her.

As a matter of fact, it was only a short time ago that me and Akitaka waited out here together for her before Akitaka concluded that it was in vain and he entrusted that object in the bag to me. I've known her to let her evening strolls last until the break of dawn, so this isn't exactly a new thing for her. But ever since she left the office yesterday, something seemed a bit strange about her.

It's because of that worry that I'm willing to wait for her until morning, but even when the sun begins to shift the sky into the dawning blue, she is yet to come home.

## **Spiral Paradox - VI**

In the time I wait for Shiki to come home, the city had taken on the appearance of its morning palette. The weather, however, seems content to return to the cloudy gray I thought it had thrown off yesterday. Not letting my worry eat away at me too much, I put it out of my mind as I head to the office.

By the time I get there, it's just past eight o' clock. I hold the little hope that Shiki might have just gone straight to work, but having been greeted by the sight of Miss Tōko sitting behind her desk alone with no one else in sight, even that hope is dashed.

I quickly greet Miss Tōko when I come in, sit down behind my desk, and continue working on whatever I was working on yesterday. My mind wasn't really into the work, and yet I still move like a machine, probably because I do almost the same thing every day. Such, I suppose, is the power of routine that it conquers even the possible work deficiency resulting from a worried mind such as mine.

“Kokutō, about the data you gave me yesterday...” I hear Miss Tōko say from her desk in front of the window.

“Right,” I reply languidly.

“It's about that high rise and its residents. You remember you were kind of miffed after only digging up stuff on thirty of the total fifty resident families, but that actually wraps it up. The remaining records don't exist in the first place. That's the reason you were only able to get their names and family trees, because those twenty families are pure fiction. I looked into it on my own time, but after

thoroughly looking at what data I could recover four times over, I gave it up. They just reused the records of people and families that've been six feet under for years.”

“Right,” I repeat.

“And all of them are in the east building too. I don’t know what’s going...” she cuts herself off mid-sentence, suddenly frowning in annoyance as if ants are blazing a trail all over her skin. She only whispers one thing that brings me back to reality.

“Someone’s coming.”

She hastily pulls out something from a desk drawer that looks about the size of a ring that looks like it’s made out of grass, and then throws it towards my direction.

“Keep holding that and stick to the wall,” she explains, wearing the furrowed brow that always denoted her worry. “Don’t wear it. Don’t draw attention to yourself. Don’t bump on anything. And not so much as a peep out of you. If you do it right, our uninvited guest will leave without even noticing you.”

The tension that her words create makes me refrain from asking any questions, and caught up with the abruptness of the entire thing, I just end up following what she said. The ring doesn’t look like it’s been made particularly skillfully, but nevertheless I grasp it in my palm as hard as I can, as if this would artificially enhance whatever effect it’s supposed to bestow. I position myself on the wall behind the couch that Shiki often lies down on, and wait.

It doesn’t take long for both of us to hear the distinct sound of footsteps. Climbing up the staircase of this unfinished building is an individual with an exaggerated cadence to his step—perhaps intentionally so. The steps don’t stop, but instead heads straight toward this office, and soon the individual in question steps through the entrance: a man clad in red.

The man’s strikingly blonde hair and blue eyes immediately mark him as not native, and his sharp and well-defined features even less so. His movements are a showman’s: refined, practiced, and well-moderated amounts of the theatrical. I place his age at about the early twenties, and his nationality is obviously European, probably German. The red coat that adorns him only completes the

image of him having stepped out of some Victorian era illustration. As soon as he enters, he raises a hand toward Miss Tōko in greeting.

“A fine morning to you, Aozaki! It’s been too long. How have you been, my dear?” His ostentatious manner carries over even to his voice, which goes up and down in points he deems dramatic. The smile that he directs to Miss Tōko is one filled with familiarity, but I can’t see him as anything but serpentine in his actions. The man stops his pace directly before Miss Tōko’s desk. Seated behind her desk, she offers a cold glance at the man.

“Cornelius Alba. What is the successor of the Sponheim Abbey doing so far from home, I wonder?”

“Why, I would have imagined that to be obvious! To see you, of course! You were so helpful in our time together in London that I thought it was only fair to give you a warning. Or could it be that you find my kindness actually bothersome?” He spreads his arms wide in a welcoming gesture and smiles. The flamboyance of his princely conduct contrasts quite sharply with Miss Tōko, who continues to generate an atmosphere of barely concealed hostility. And yet, the man laughs right in front of her before he goes on with his explanation.

“And besides, why not stay? After all, Japan is such a wonderful country. It’s modern yet has that isolated ‘Macondo’ feeling, precisely why the Ordo Magi tends to overlook it. They even have their own dynasties, and their own quaint traditions of the Art, like that *Onmyōdō* stuff, which I can’t really tell apart from *Shintō*, but whatever. The splendid thing about this Japanese lot is how they don’t intrude on your personal space, quite unlike the nosiness of the Ordo. When something disagreeable is happening, they don’t move to nip it in the bud, but instead clean up afterwards, like janitors. All the Japanese are the same way. Oh, but don’t misunderstand, I like that about them. It’s a situation so opposite from where I come from, and perfect for the apostates who have severed relations with the Ordo, of which I am a part of anyway, so perhaps this business is none of mine.” He laughs to bookend his elucidation, which is quickly becoming annoying.

Still, I guess what Miss Tōko said is true. He doesn’t seem to be looking anywhere near my direction, nor noticing me in particular. Giving an angled glance at the young man who shot words out rapid-fire, Miss Tōko finally

speaks.

“If idle chatter is your objective here, then you can go out the same way you came in. You trespass on my sanctum, and I could kill you where you stand and no one would object.”

“Ah, but you do not remember that you transgressed first by entering my sanctum, so my case against you has greater merit. You were in the company of someone else at the time, and I did not know whether he was of our traditions or not, so I held off on greeting you as a proper host would.”

“So I was right about that high rise apartment building. If it was you who weaved the Art into that amateurish ward, then you might want to adjust your self-esteem...downwards.” Miss Tōko allows herself the subtlest smile, but the blonde-haired man does not take it humorously at all.

“Can you not see its genius? We craft our sanctums and our chantries as a space separate from the consensus, and our wards serve the purpose of keeping the stupid masses of humanity out, further estranging us and our practices. You reinforce the ward further and further, build your walls higher, and eventually the Ordo is wise to you. Either way, someone will catch on, mage or no. But that apartment building is none of these things. Its nature is covert, our own little world where we can conduct our studies in peace, far from the worries of the consensus or the Ordo. And to my knowledge, only one man can do it, with a method far from the crude weavings of neophytes and pretenders.”

“Oh, so you’re here for praise? For accolades? To prove that you’ve caught up to me and him?” Miss Tōko asks. “Well, if you want someone to vindicate your scholarly efforts, then I’ll indulge you. Congratulations, Cornelius Alba.” Her voice drips with sarcasm.

“Don’t you dare dismiss me so easily, Aozaki. Alaya doesn’t even factor into my scale anymore. He has me to thank for the puppets in that building and the brains that I keep alive and well-functioning. Without me, he is nothing.” By now the man’s expression had converted into a parody of its former mirth, and the youthfulness he radiated when he walked through the door is all but gone, replaced by a menacing scowl.

“Goodness, how our little boy has grown. Don’t kid yourself, Alba. Both of us

are apostates to the Ordo, and our neophyte days are over. What are you really here for? If you're just going to brag about your research then you can just throw it to the rabid fanclub you must surely have in excess."

"You never change, do you? Then let us dispense with conversation for now. Your sanctum is far too dull and droll for me. In time, you'll find yourself back in that building, and perhaps there we can carry on a proper chat, in a more refined environment." He pauses, both of them eyeing each other, before he says, "Aozaki, the *Taijitu* is ours."

Miss Tōko's eyes twitch for a moment upon hearing the peculiar word. "Containing a *Taijitu* within itself? Do you really want to reach the spiral of origin so badly? You are complete fools if you think of yourselves as higher than other mages and can beat even the reach of the Deterrent."

"As I have said, there will be no interference from the Deterrent, or from the consensus from which its authority stems. This is not a new method we created, but just an old trick we never realized before. Still, we will be sure to watch our step. Don't worry. Your Ryōgi will receive the utmost care and attention."

"What the hell have you done with Shiki?!" I suddenly find myself shouting, unable to contain myself as soon as I hear the name. Both of them turn to look at me at the same time, Miss Tōko's face a picture of disappointment at my idiocy. The man in the red coat looks at me almost in disbelief. Ah, well, there'll be plenty of time for berating myself later. After recovering from the apparent surprise, he smiles his widest smile yet.

"You must be the boy from yesterday, tagging along with Aozaki here." He turns back to Miss Tōko. "I had known you to be the kind not to take apprentices, but ah, here we have the proof to the contrary, don't we? Splendid! Simply splendid! Certainly one more thing to be happy about!" With his arms gestured outwards like an opera singer, and the random shifts of his sing-song voice, I can't rightly think of him as anything but the most peculiar man.

"I suppose it would be pointless for me to say at this point that he's not my apprentice?" Miss Tōko sighs, frustrated and with fingers brushing her forehead. "Now, if that's all, then I thank you for sharing the information. I know the face rubbing simply must be done for your sake. But haven't you thought I could

report this to the Ordo?"

"The bureaucracy of that organization works against itself. All the practical preparations they would have to do to get the permission of so and so will take six days at least, and another two to coordinate with the local chapters to even get so much as a pair of feet over here. Much, much slower than the Biblical God and his act of genesis, and so much one can do in such a span!" As an exclamation mark to his proclamation, he laughs so hard he bends over, unable to contain himself, making me feel uneasy. As he tires of it, he turns his back on us, the only trace of that laugh being the smile that bends the corners of his mouth. "Well then, I shall see you again soon, I hope. I know you have your own preparations to arm, but I will look forward to our next meeting."

The man then leaves, red coat flapping about from his boisterous movements, leaving us with the cheerful disposition on his face before he is out the door and disappears from view.

"Ma'am, explain to me what the hell just happened?"

Miss Tōko's tension was gone the minute that man was out the door, and she returns to her customary laid back look. She even returns to her customary laid back answers. "Nothing. Just telling us a friendly neighborhood warning that they've captured Shiki, is all." I'm at a loss at what to say to her, except ask her the question whose answer I think I can surmise from Miss Tōko and the red coated man's conversation.

"Where?"

"Ōgawa Apartments, somewhere on the top floor most likely. If I follow the logic of their crazy rituals, then Shiki, as the *yin*, has to be in the west building." From her breast pocket she produces a cigarette, which she then lights and takes a puff of as she stares lazily at the ceiling in seeming relief. Unfortunately, I'm not as keenly optimistic as she is. I can't bring myself to believe the man in the coat when he said that Shiki is unharmed, but I can't just sit here and not make sure if it's true or not either. I head for the door with a quickened pace until Miss Tōko shouts,

"Don't."

I turn back to her. “Look, ma’am, I know it’s your policy not to get involved without money on the table, but—”

“Oh, simmer down for a moment, would you?” she scolds, not really with displeasure so much as exasperation. “As a matter of fact, I do know who Shiki is, alright? I’ve had a feeling this day would come when I first met her in the hospital. This is just fate collecting on the debt I owe it that day. Kokutō, you don’t go into a mage’s chantry without a plan on how to fight him. Even Alba had to get past some nasty setups to even get up here, and you’ll have to do the same, except without the benefit of seeing them. Walk in there thinking you can wing it, and I can guarantee that you will come out in a form unrecognizable to most people before you’re even ten meters past the entrance.”

When she explains that, the gravity of the implication that the weirdo in the red coat is just like Miss Tōko, with just as much hidden potential for manipulating reality in creative ways, finally begins to set in.

“But what about yesterday? We were fine then, weren’t we?” “Because they thought you were just some regular guy. Didn’t I tell you before? Mages don’t use the Art on normal people unless they’re backed into a corner. You goof off, weave your spell like an amateur, and it’s more trouble for them than they probably know how to deal with. Make no mistake; Alba wants you dead as much as he does me.”

“That’s true,” I say, thinking it over better now that I’m calmed down. “I suppose they could even just mess with my brain, or some other horrible stuff.”

“Yes,” she nods, “and no. Messing with a brain is easy enough to do for a lot of mages who specialize in it. But it’s far from being in common use. The old “he’s crazy because fairies messed his shit up” excuse tends to not work anymore, since people tend to have social groups—family, friends, the social niche he belongs to—that investigates, traces it back somewhere. The more you conceal it with the Art, the more you draw attention to some weird shit going down in your general area, and you risk discovery each time. And besides, a spell isn’t permanent. It’s a constant fight between the spell you weave, and the will of the affected mind. Sometimes, their mind wins, and the person gets their memories back, and that’s bad luck for you.”

She crushes the cigarette on the ashtray and leaves it there. She's right, I realize it now. Things without explanation demand it, and the people will look for it, because those things are distinct only in that an explanation for them doesn't exist. And if that blonde guy just started killing people it would just bring more eyes than anything. Add that to this new Internet thing going around, and it's becoming easier and easier to track a person down, trace where he went. Which will lead them to the apartment building. Hence, its unassuming build, designed to make people feel as normal inside as they possibly can. Judging by his and Miss Tōko's conversation, that Alba character can't be up to any good in there, and yet he wouldn't have touched the incident with the burglar or the dying woman who wandered into the building with a ten-foot pole, since to him, the police coming, checking things out, and finding nothing weird is better than them launching a full-on investigation.

"And so that's where we stand," Miss Tōko mentions with a sigh. "Notice, Kokutō, how Alba said that his ward was flawless. And yet fate gives us not one, but two incidents that put the high rise on our suspicion radar, and now Shiki's gone and disappeared there as well. If there's a lesson here, it's that reality will always abhor a paradox, no matter how well disguised."

"Is that what both of you called that 'Deterrent' a while earlier?" Upon the mention of the strange word, Miss Tōko adopts an almost disgusted look as she nods in agreement.

"Perhaps. It's only a theory, a metaphysical rule of the universe. It's the 'consensus' I always talk about, humanity's greatest ally, and a mage's most constant enemy. We have no ill will towards people, and only want to live in peace. Unfortunately, reality feels the same way. The combined will of all the people form into a consensual paradigm which tends to restore reality to a stable state, to combat things that logically shouldn't exist... like the Art and mages. Sometimes, when the consensus is so focused, it coalesces, and becomes a literal manifestation. It can cast its hands into fate to move otherwise normal people in positions that would topple great men. Humanity's swirling consensus itself is its unseen protector, and the people it channels its will into were the ones we called heroes, though it's not so easy to have the same result now in the plurality of our world and the ease with which we can fuck ourselves over without knowing it.

The Deterrent influences people all the time, saving us without us knowing it. But don't mistake it as having any empathy for humans. It's only loyalty is to the consensus, and it doesn't take into account something like human happiness, where there seems to be no consensus at all. We can only be sure about two things: it is humanity's representative will, and it will eliminate the paradoxes of the world, the mages and their experiments with the illogical Art."

Respect and loathing permeates Miss Tōko's speech at the same time, as though she can't quite decide how to deal with this "Deterrent" business. Her story reminds me of many things, of many philosophers all speaking about something similar; and another story of a certain peasant woman of Orleans, driven to action by a force she said was God. Perhaps this Deterrent was what truly moved her?

"Well, that certainly clarifies that, ma'am. So I suppose Shiki is a part of a similar experiment, right?" I know where she's going with this, as I've learned long before that she says nothing that is without meaning, even if might only be revealed sometimes much later. So I gathered from her conversation with Alba that this experiment—or whatever it is—is the reason behind Shiki's disappearance.

She smothers her cigarette after one last drag then turns to look at me, smiling contentedly at something beyond what I can grasp. "I don't know what Alba is planning with Shiki exactly. I just know that he plans to reach the spiral of origin. At some point, they'll have to use her body, but Alba's wasn't one for that sort of disgusting work back then, and like everything about him, it probably hasn't changed. He'll think it through until the last minute. Assuming they captured Shiki safely, she's probably still alive."

"She is," I say firmly. "I mean, that's the only thing he could've meant when he said he'd take care of her, right?" I realize I have my eyes set solidly on Miss Tōko, which she might have mistaken for an accusatory look. The truth is that I can't get the little fear of Shiki being killed out of my head. "Which is why we need to move now."

*But how*, I ask myself. I could call the police on the guy, but from experience with Miss Tōko, I'm sure a mage must always have some sort of escape plan when they need it in short notice. And so it boils down to two things: eliminate

Alba, or get in and sneak Shiki out of there. I suppose, if I'm honest with myself, I'd have to say it boils down to one. I move to search for the blueprints of the building among Miss Tōko's scattered documents. Maybe I can find a way in that even he doesn't know about.

"Stop. Stop, stop, stop," Miss Tōko says with audible frustration as she waves her arms to get my attention. "Is your head really so thick that everything I've said just passed through your skull? There is absolutely no way you're getting in there. Just like when Shiki just woke up from the coma, this isn't your cue to dance. After all, a mage should face a mage. It's only proper." Upon saying that, she stands up abruptly, and puts on her brown trench coat, leather make and thick enough to probably receive glancing blows from a knife. "You got one thing right, though. No use in drawing this out too long. I'll set out tonight. Kokutō, if you'll be so kind as to get the orange briefcase in my closet."

There is a hint of resignation in her voice, and driven by that, I head to her room and open the closet. Inside, the clothes you would expect to be present are instead replaced by bags and the desired orange briefcase, all of them looking like they're quite full for a long trip. When I carry the briefcase by the hand, I discover just how heavy it is. Despite the copious amount of stickers stuck to it, it retains its well-made appearance. When I return and hand it over to her, she retrieves the cigarette box from her breast pocket and hands it to me.

"Keep it for me. They're cigarettes from Taiwan and they fucking suck, but there's only one box of them, made by some weirdo. It's probably my second favorite thing in the world." She turns her back on me to leave. "Is your most favorite thing yourself?" I ask.

"Good guess," she says, laughing, "but even I wouldn't place a person in the level of objects." Before she's out of the door, she speaks her piece one more time. "Kokutō, mages are kind to their friends. They're the only thing they have in a world against them. So do me a favor: stay out of trouble, and just stay here, alright? I'll bring Shiki back tonight."

And with that, the brown-coated mage opens the door and departs, with me not even saying a goodbye even as I hear the rare sound of her shoes echoing upon the staircase.



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Paradox Paradigm.

# *Spiral Paradox*





## Chapter 13

To the west, an orange sunset blazed, bathing the spiral high rise in its rays and creating a long shadow pointing to the east. Aozaki Tōko stands just outside of the apartment building's garden as all the city contents itself with the approach of twilight. Her immense brown trench coat doesn't suit her small frame at all, worn more like armor than an article of clothing. She gives the high rise's top floor one short glance before taking her orange briefcase in one hand and striding through the greenery of the garden and entering the building itself.

The glass walls of the entrance let in a trace of the sunset, dyeing the walls and floor just beside it in a color as red as the sun it emanates from. After sparing a moment for a final sigh, she walks forward, then upon reaching the central elevator, turns abruptly toward the right, heading to the east lobby.

She remembers it from the last time she was here, its semi-circular shape and stairs to a second floor reminding her how large the room is. Here, the violent redness of outside can no longer be found, replaced instead with yellow lights shining on the marble floor and the cheaply painted walls.

"What a surprise! You are quite easy to incite after all, Aozaki." The statement echoes in the lobby, said by a man in a high toned voice. Saying nothing, Tōko instead directs her attention to the gently sloping stairs at the center of it all, where the man in a red coat stands in one of the steps. "But it is, of course, a surprise of the welcome variety. I welcome you, master puppeteer, to my gehenna."

Cornelius Alba's smile displays his teeth, and with a similarly grandiose

gesture, bows from his waist.

“Gehenna?” Tōko asks with eyebrow cocked.

“Appropriate, isn’t it? This is a place much like that ancient valley where Baalites once threw their children into the roasting fires, though unfortunately the god Moloch is not here with us now. It’s a reality so splendidly demarcated from the consensus of the masses, and here we carve our path to ascension.”

He has his eyes cast downward at Tōko as he speaks in triumph. But she doesn’t give the man any room to read her when she replies.

“Hardly a surprise that the descendant of Cornelius Agrippa is a probable Judaizer. Unlike you though, I imagine Agrippa would have divined the true purpose to this place. And if you want to see the slaughter and wailing and gnashing of teeth that you love so much, I suggest you make a quick stop in Kosovo or the Congo. Your pitiful operation is nothing compared to that.” Tōko sets her briefcase down on the floor, producing a dry clicking sound. “This place is nothing but a purgatory where none of the souls pass on, where endless suffering is the end goal and not the punishment. This isn’t divine, nor is it magic, at least not coming from someone like you.”

The red coated mage’s face betrays only a small twitch of muscle at her words. Tōko looks at Alba, but also beyond him, as if her opponent was not the man but the very building itself.

“Now,” Tōko continues, “let’s drop the pretense that it’s you who came up with this Taijitu idea and just make Alaya show his face already. You have little business with what will soon occur. I don’t know your real reason for being here, but it’s likely it has little to do with any higher arcane goals. Just giving you a fair warning in return for the one you gave me.”

Tōko casts her eyes around the walls, searching for an unseen enemy, while never returning her glance to Alba. The red coated mage looks upon her with murder and what may be the prelude to tears in his eyes.

“You were always like this,” he murmurs. “Yes, you’re always like this!” Louder now. “You always looked down on me. I studied runes before you did, studied the Art of dolls and puppeteering well in advance of you. But oh, how you fooled those imbeciles in the Collegium into thinking you were better, that

you were more creative. But we both know the truth. I'm the inheritor of Sponheim Abbey, after all! After my forty years of scholarship in the Art, a mage no older than a teenager has no business even being recognized by me!"

Somewhere in his tirade, the murmur turned into an agitated bellowing that echoes in the lobby. Tōko stares uninterestedly at this man who has abandoned his niceties so neatly only to insult her thoroughly.

"Age isn't a factor in academics, you know," Tōko replies. "And Cornelius, don't get me wrong, I think taking time to look younger is alright, but you're so focused on it that your Art loses its touch, I think." She delivers it calmly, and yet this is perhaps the worst precision guided insult she can ever throw at him. The face that once looked like it belonged to a young man now twists with hatred, returning him to his appropriate age.

"I haven't said why I came here in the first place, have I?" With a deep breath, Alba regains composure. "I have no interest in Alaya's little experiment, nor do I share his goal in reaching the Akasha, that numinous concept that may or may not exist. I see no reason why one needs to swim upstream to attain gnosis and ascension." He withdraws one step upward. "Telling you about Shiki Ryōgi was my idea. The old man Alaya put himself in harm's way to capture the little girl. Offed themselves about the same time, I suppose. And so, this domain is mine until the structure twists time and returns him to his previous state, but I have no intention of continuing Alaya's work. I don't suppose you've figured it out, but I came here to your little edge of the world, just so I could kill you, Aozaki!"

Alba hisses her name, like a curse that could destroy his very ability to speak. He runs to the top of the stairs to the second floor balcony, and Tōko only looks on curiously. From the walls flow a curious substance that appears to be liquid, sharing its cream color with the walls it clings to.

"Playing your tulpas, huh?" Tōko utters in a mix of bemusement and scorn. With astonishing quickness, the substance oozes down from the walls and into the first floor where Tōko is standing dead center. As it nears the floor, it starts to coalesce in different places, in different forms: some humanoid, some beast like, all quite real. Their surface resembles keloid, and their mass constantly shifts, a face here and there, or some barely recognizable animal, appearing as though they are in a constant state of perfect, if unsightly, decay.

“Not the best tulpas I’ve seen Alba, but not entirely surprising. Hey, maybe you can be a special effects guy! I mean, of course you’d be limited to creature features and Hammer horrors, but it’s better than sitting around in an old abbey, right?” She shouts at Alba even as the things inch ever closer to her.

*Well, maybe this is a horror movie of some sort, Tōko thinks. Not the kind where the problem is solved with a cross or a shotgun, though.* With barely two meters left separating her from the slowly advancing “tulpas”, she stands stoic, reaching instinctively for the absent pack of cigarettes in her breast pocket. *Fuck, that’s right, Mikiya’s got them. Should’ve bought some Japanese brands on my way here. Well, we all have to make sacrifices once in a while, even for something as boring as this display of Art.*

“On second thought, Alba, maybe Hollywood isn’t your calling after all,” Tōko yells out loud. “There’s a much more discerning audience now. Creature design workshop time! Let’s see if we can’t teach you a thing or two!” With an unexpected motion, she kicks the briefcase she had set down on the floor next to her earlier.

“*OUT!*” With one word, her voice booms, containing an authority that brooks no refusal. At the mere mention of the word, the bag opens, revealing itself to be empty. And yet, something black forms a tight perimeter around Tōko Aozaki. Like a dark whirlwind given form, and Tōko right in the calm eye of the storm, the black object spins round and round, wider and wider, its speed blinding both her and Alba to its true form. In the space of a few seconds, the tulpas are completely gone, with nary a trace of the ooze.

Still standing at the center of it all, having barely moved from her original position, is Tōko Aozaki. Beside her lie the open, empty briefcase...and a cat, peacefully relaxing. Alba can only stare at it in a daze. The cat stands taller than Tōko, even as it sits, and its body is pitch black, without a trace of warmth on its surface. A cat made from shadow, whose only distinguishing feature is the pair of eyes it possesses, resembling a hieroglyph.

“What in the hell is that thing?” Alba says, incredulously glaring at the cat. Their eyes meet. And though both he and Tōko know there is no other distinguishable feature on its “face,” he feels the creature smile at him. Alba looks for all the world like he’s just seen a nightmare, but Tōko keeps her

silence. Somewhere, a steady metronomic scratching fills a tempo to the dead air. “So the rumors I heard were wrong? Your sister mage didn’t destroy your familiar?” he asks in disbelief, unable to withstand the growing silence.

“Let’s not start throwing around libelous accusations at your sources now, whoever they may be.” Then she directs her attention to the silhouette of the cat beside her, raising a hand to pat it gently, and saying in cloying words, “Good girl. Human meat is the next item for dinner, which should be much better than the pile of tulpas fashioned from *prima materia* that you just swallowed. This one is more nutritious. Don’t restrain yourself. After all, he’s one of my friends from the old days. Remember all those times I told you how tasty they are?”

In an instant, the black silhouette is off, seemingly gliding above the marble floor to the foot of the stairs, manifesting the same haste that it had done only a moment before, taking no more than ten seconds to reach the first step. Its feet do not appear to be moving, or at least mortal vision presents it as such. But Alba, like Tōko, sees like no mortal, and a mage cannot be brought low so simply. Before the shadow cat had even begun to move, Alba had already begun to weave a spell.

**“False shadow, who can neither touch nor see, let the light of my Art cast you into oblivion!”**

With a calmness belying his current predicament, Alba recites the words, the incantations called lorica which many mages use to decorate the weaving of their Art. The lorica and the expression is a mage’s own, colored by his choice and personality, a way to channel the Art through a mnemonic familiar to the paradigm of their mind. The goal is a sort of autohypnosis; coercing themselves into a state of mind that enhances a spell’s potency so they can better manipulate the rules of the material world. Impressive, Tōko thinks. *He actually cut down on the excessive five-line loricas from way back. Didn’t even take two seconds. Guess he can improve. Yet Tōko only expresses her praise through a snort in his direction.*

“Let my will be my fist and strike you down.”

He gestures, arm outstretched, in the direction of the shadow closing with him, just arriving at the foot of the stairs. When it reaches the first step, the very air

rumbles, and the lobby instantly becomes noticeably hotter. Willed into existence right before his eyes, Alba conjures a pillar of blue flame, undulating like a mirage of a geyser and consuming the stairway. Stretching from the floor and to the ceiling it soon bursts through, it starts to rob the room of its oxygen, and the shadow that would have climbed the stairs to assault Alba can no longer be seen. No animal can survive that heat; the temperature is high enough to reduce any common solid object to nothingness.

In moments, the pillar of flame dies, but what Alba sees in its wake makes his blue eyes widen.

“Impossible,” he mentions, for in the middle of the charred stairway is the black familiar, licking itself as though the spell had produced a good sensation. It locks eyes with him for a moment, and then resumes its charge toward Alba. He spares no hesitation.

**“Again!”**

Alba repeats the spell, noticeably weaker this time without the benefit of the lorica. The blue pillar appears again, but the familiar is no longer held at bay. Alba can almost see the flames pass over it and through it as the creature races toward him in a straight, unwavering course.

**“Again!”**

Flames appear and disappear yet another time. The cat familiar nears its prey.

**“Again!”**

The fourth time is as ineffective as the first. With the cat safely on the second floor, it approaches Alba and it opens itself, its entire larger-than-man sum breaking open from head to toe like a tulip, losing any semblance of a cat. With what could be termed its insides, Alba can see the tulpas he had vested so much hope in earlier clinging to the walls of the cavity, and he finally realizes that this familiar is nothing more than a mouth, an object that consumes that has simply taken the shape of a cat.

**“Aga—”**

Facing death, Alba risks one last attempt to weave a spell, but before he finishes, the thing takes him in its mouth, the cavity grasping him by the red coat

hanging on his shoulders. The blackness of the shadow is the last thing he can remember before he sinks into oblivion.

“ŌKEN.”

A third voice is heard, and a lorica echoes throughout the lobby.

At the word’s utterance, the shadow familiar that has Alba by the scruff of the neck immediately halts. Even Tōko knows enough about the owner of the voice to face it the moment she heard it. Behind Alba stands a man, burdened with eyes of perpetual melancholy and rigidity and wearing a black greatcoat. He stands stock still as though he was observing the entire time, and yet one cannot find any traces of his sudden appearance. The man retrieves Alba with one arm, and then unceremoniously casts him away, setting him down on the ground. The cat familiar, having stepped onto the curious tri-circular geometry describing a perimeter around the man, is still as a stone. When the man finally notices Tōko, she feels the air become noticeably colder, losing the slack it held seconds ago, though she’d like to think that it’s just her imagination. The structure itself seems to tense to welcome its true master.

“Aozaki. You have changed much. Has it been so long?”

“It has. I wish it could’ve been longer.”

The man known as Sōren Alaya descends the blackened steps, ash still falling from the ceiling drifting down to rest on his shoulders, and Tōko’s familiar seemingly being strung along by the spell that surrounds him. He remains on the first step of the stairs, forcing Tōko to angle her head slightly upward to face him.

“Alba has overstepped his bounds. I had intended for this experiment to pass without your notice. This encounter is a curious coincidence, but perhaps inevitable.”

“Ah, coincidence,” Tōko sighs, “the convenient word we use to blind ourselves from the sacred mystery play of fate.” She slowly retreats back to the wall as she speaks to buy time. Sōren is different from Alba. Though their facility with the Art may rate similarly, Sōren Alaya has home court advantage here in his sanctum. She keeps her attention directed forward even as she falls back, watching for any openings she can exploit even as she knows Alaya is doing the

same.

“So tell me, what’s up with your Schrödinger’s mansion?” she muses. “You do already know that killing a whole bunch of people to build up a resonance of death to reach the origin has been proven impossible quite spectacularly before, right?”

“I know the history. But I also know a truth you are not privy to. I too was blinded by the success that sheer numbers seemed to promise. Given enough men, I would come upon a soul I could latch onto in its passing of the threshold, and follow its return to the spiral of origin. But I was denied, for I looked to the number, not the manner of death. And so I studied the deaths, and as the hexagrams of the *I Ching* prescribe, I was able to discern the sixty-four manners of death, of which each resident of this domain corresponds to. What I have here is a microcosm of the universe. I witness their anguish, and record its significance, and in time, perhaps reality and my will may transmute the sixty-four hexagrams into the eight, and that into the four shishō, and that into the pair of extremes that is the *ryōgi*, and finally into the Akasha, the great origin.”

“Man, Alaya, this whole business of fashioning things into the whole is consuming you bad. You indulge your occult Arts, missing the true point of the *ryōgi* polarity: that opposites aren’t that way because of conflict, but because of dynamism. Opposites define each other, which is why they aren’t a whole. You place such a premium on the totality of death, give such importance to its chronicling that you’re forgetting the life that gave them their worth. Look at yourself! This St. Peter with the book of life thing you got going will only destroy you.”

“It does not matter whether I die or not. Only reaching the origin for my purposes drives me now.” His words are confident, unwavering. He truly believes in his self-appointed duty.

This building, with its self-contained spiral of death and rebirth, has existed for so long outside of consensus, it has become its own separate reality. *This place is his temple, an extension of him, and his tie to it is so strong it bows to his will*, Tōko thinks. *The entire place reeks with the resonance of the hatred the people here can no longer give voice to. It’s sickening, and Alaya is making it stronger every day, with deaths that never get the opportunity to pass the threshold every*

time.

*Deaths of silence borne from lovers and family, of father, mother, and the quiet march of time.*

*Deaths of malice borne from lovers and family, of friends, colleagues, and the conflicting hatred of strangers.*

*Alba was right about one thing: all of this—the confluence of all this corrupted energy, all the mana the structure is heaving forth from the land, all the death—is one big sacrificial altar, framed in fearful symmetry, all for Alaya's crazy dream.* And Tōko finally realizes that this is something far beyond the realm of simple tricks that the Art can offer, but well into the domain of rumored sorcery, the pure magic, the product of true gnosis beyond the reach of mortal hands, and for the first time, she doubts herself.

“How can this thing stand without the consensus of humanity tearing it apart? Something should have happened by now. At this point the Deterrent should already have made its play, moving an individual as its agent, triggering events that will cause your downfall one way or another. Why is there no one?” Tōko asks with doubt and curiosity.

“Have you not asked yourself why you yourself are in this city? Why a man would find himself burgling that particular house? Why a woman would, in her dying moments, stumble clumsily inside this building? I have kept this experiment as covert as possible, and yet here we have signs of the Deterrent working against me. I once tried to find a way to fool it, but it is all, as I realized, temporary. I simply did not have the ability.” For the first time, there is something akin to disappointment in his tone. He keeps his intensity focused on Tōko, and sees nothing but her. “Any man thinks himself less once he realizes he is no less potent than any animal. Men strive for perfection, but are denied so by the consensus, a paradox that forms the theme of our lives: existing to climb ever higher heights, but rejecting the task only to exist.

“The mages who have ascended—the ones who have reached the origin—had no will to power, but instead were given that power by the deterministic properties that entropy imposes on our reality. When one speaks of ability, one truly speaks only of fate, of the prefabricated decisions, capabilities, and choices

that shape our lives. We humans who have inherited the potential to ascend have fallen so far into this material world, our nature scattered and pluralized, separated from the power that is our birthright. And so I realized that while I may not have the ability to thwart the Deterrent and realize the path to the spiral of origin, I only need find someone in the multitudes that can. I needed only one empty soul, whose nature tied it back to the indescribable ‘ ’. It has taken me many years—”

“But you found her. And her name is Shiki Ryōgi.” Tōko wonders briefly if the Ryōgi dynasty even knew what the dangerous progeny of their lineage implied and was truly capable of becoming. “Then you used Kirie Fujō and Asagami Fujino as bait to lure Shiki in without attracting the Deterrent to your scent. You hold two broken mirrors up to her to make her realize what she is. Got a hand it to you, there’s no better teacher than experience. Your gameplan for Shiki still isn’t clear, though. What’s it going to be? Bringing **Shiki** back from the dead? Or did you just kidnap her for a social call?”

“What I did two years ago only set the destiny that had been forged for *Shiki* Ryōgi into motion. A solution has presented itself. She has no need of that body, and I will take it for my own purposes.”

“Wait a minute. Don’t tell me you want to transfer your soul...” Tōko’s voice trails off, her index finger connecting invisible dots in the air until it finally makes sense to her. Alaya sees no need to answer, believing it to be obvious. Finally, Tōko says, “You’re sick, you know that? But since you’re still here, I suppose Shiki’s still alright. I don’t think it’s in bad form to ask if you’ll just give her back to me?”

“If that is your desire, then come and claim her.”

“So a duel, I expect. And I don’t fancy myself the violent type either. These are the punches I need to roll with when I decided to take her in, I suppose.”

“I do not think it is in bad form to ask if you will not work with me in this endeavor?” Alaya pleads, though his hostile demeanor does not budge an inch. Tōko answers her with a sly smile, lowering her head politely and closing her amber eyes as if she had just made a regrettable but necessary decision. “I see,” Alaya continues. “I thought that would be your answer. It is a shame that it has

to be so. There was a time when we were both driven to seek the origin. I truly miss that part of you.” Alaya moves a step forward, accompanied by its echoing tap on the marble floor as he finally descends to the first floor. “You were different from the other mages in the Collegium. Ambitious. Perhaps even as obsessed as any able philosopher would be. Yours was the path of the material, while mine was the path of the soul. I had even thought, that in our lives spent chasing after our goal, you would be first. But you abandoned your calling. You do not even carry yourself as a mage would anymore. It mystifies me. For what else do we mages study and seize power if not for ascension? Why concern yourself with this pointless self-exile in this country?” Only his eyes communicate his anger and frustration, but with everything else about him, he remains still.

Tōko shrugs and smiles. “There’s nothing really special about it. I just got tired of the whole cosmic game, filled to the brim with paradoxes as it was. The more you learn, it just seems you realize that you’ve just grown dumber. Like you know how they say the clearest path to ascension is an empty mind, but if that was the case, you wouldn’t even be aware of the spiral of origin in the first place? Yeah, shit like that. I accepted it and moved on. You haven’t. Seems to be the biggest difference, though.” She sighs through the last sentence, and the confession seems all the more melancholic for it. Now they stand and look upon each other on equal footing.

“Then you have fallen into a lie,” Alaya says, his voice falling into a tone of all the regret he can muster. “It does not, however, answer why you are here.”

“You’ve gone too far to even realize it now. And I’m telling you, it’s not entirely about Shiki either. Girl’s practically a mystery that even I can’t unravel. Dollars to donuts she finds her own way out of here.” Tōko briefly entertains the idea of being someone unknowingly influenced by the Deterrent, but she quickly dispels it. *I’m no hero*, she thinks, *not that it matters*. The only thing she accepts is her own life, built from the coincidences and crossed paths that may never happen again, even if she lived somewhere as iterative as this structural embodiment of paradox. Her resolve is borne only out of an inclination to protect it.

“Alaya, you must think me weak. And maybe you would be right. I’ve come to

hold the concept of the solitary sage as an ideal, an individual with power tempered by wisdom, isolated and alone. But I know I'll never really achieve it, with all the sins and baggage in my closet. Mages build their chantries to close themselves off, thinking themselves above the rabble, and yet retain their grip on their previous humanity in tiny, but noticeable ways. They toil with their *ars magna*, a Great Work, the final key to their labors, but for what? An abstract dream of ascension? For a fake sense of a greater good? Then where are these ‘enlightened’ despots, guiding our journey in the material world? Is it you? You think you’re pure while the mortals are unclean. Bullshit. You shut your eyes to the blood on your hands that brands you a criminal and a disgrace, all the while calling yourself ‘special’ and the true savior of this slowly ebbing reality. I once thought like you, but then I wised up down the line. Face it, Alaya. Mages entertain their obsessions of ascension and pneumatological delusions because we’re the ones that are weak.”

The black clad mage sees fit not to speak, the best thing that passes as contemplation for him. He only continues to move forward one step at a time toward Tōko, until he says, “Even if you are right, there is no turning back on the path that leads me closer every moment to the origin. Your actions and opposition force me to acknowledge you as the Deterrent’s will manifest. In the end, Aozaki, the lie has tempered your ambition. It is disappointing that you were still human, in the end.”

Tōko notes that reality inside the building shifts perceptibly along the concepts of Alaya’s mind. From afar, mage and mage end the long discourse that fill the hole of the long years of each other’s absence with a two final statements, recited almost like a prayer, a chant with the weight of tradition to it.

“What do you seek, Alaya?”

“True wisdom.”

“Where do you seek it, Alaya?”

“Nowhere else but within me.”

His footsteps halt near the center of the lobby. Together, they begin their opening gambits in a match that seeks to expunge the other from the world altogether.

Tōko places a foot atop her fallen briefcase, carefully studying how Alaya will conduct his attack. Behind him, her black cat familiar is in complete stasis, unable to defeat the magic of Alaya's ward. Tōko remembers it, and the component thaumaturgical processes by which it is formed, all of which Alaya named after phrases and traditional mantras: *fugu*, *kongō*, *dakatsu*, *taiten*, *chōgyō*, and *ōken*. Together they form a potent ward that envelops the space around him, halting the movements of any who step within that cannot overcome its magic. Normally, such a ward cannot be moved, establishing a simple boundary, but somehow he has found a way to violate this rule, and thus became a formidable enemy, stymieing any efforts to fight him in close combat, not to mention the other Arts with which he handles projectiles.

Unlike Alba, both Tōko and Alaya never incorporated their Art of manipulating and shaping matter to compel it to an offensive purpose. And yet, even within Tōko's favored rune Art, there are ways. Tōko need only write “*sōwilō*”, the rune for fire, and she can shape it into reality. Normally, she can write it from afar, in the air if she wanted, but any mage can spot the casting and stop it. For it to work, she needs to get up close and write it directly on his body, but Alaya's wards are denying her that option.

Tōko curses her inflexibility in the Art in this pivotal moment, but as far she knows Alaya is in a similar position, unless he has learned a thing or two in the years they've been apart. She had chosen crafting dolls as her metaphor for ascension, while he had chosen the study of death. Besides this, Tōko is aware of the skill Alaya can bring to bear even without the Art, as even he has seen his fair share of wars. Knowing this, Tōko has no other option except to play it defensively and attempt to lure him to the trap she had set here some time before.

Alaya makes his move. He extends his left arm toward Tōko, palm out, like a man calling out to someone on a distant horizon, and his hand makes only the slightest twitch.

“**SHUKU**,” he recites. He clenches his palm into a fist in time with the lorica with a crushing weight. Simultaneously, Tōko is struck back with a sudden force, the enchanted coat she had relied on to protect her from attack being torn in a visibly radial pattern around her center of mass. The attack makes her fall to one

knee on the ground. It only takes Tōko a moment to know what Alaya did: he manipulated the space she occupied, distorting distances and creating a tear that crushed the very air she stood upon. She is surprised; even space is within his mastery now. The building and the influence his will has upon the area must certainly be helping him cast such an Art with ease.

“Damn it,” Tōko coughs out, a few precious droplets of blood escaping her lips. She forces down the rest of the bloody lump rising in her throat. “How many bones did I pay for that one?” Right now, she envies the physical endurance that Shiki has demonstrated time and again. She has no time to know how extensive the damage to her body is, but she does know that her coat took the brunt of it, but that’s all. One more of that, and it’s all over.

“**GO!**!” She orders, her own lorica tinged with magic. The shadow familiar stirs, reacting to it. It seems it could move through Alaya’s wards after all, revealing its state of rest as an elaborate act. Tōko can almost feel what can be described as an emotion of relief emanate from it when she unleashes the order to attack.

“What—” Alaya lets slip a moment of surprise as he turns his head over his shoulder to react. With barely a hair’s breadth of distance between him and the familiar, Alaya manages to perform the same trick twice, crushing the space directly in front of the hand he raises to meet the approaching attacker. Before the shadow familiar falls into the affected space however, it evades and changes its direction midflight, directing itself to the ceiling where it lands its cat paws and hangs upside down in defiance of common gravity.

“Enough of this,” declares Alaya with rising confidence. He raises his other hand and directs it at the ceiling even before the familiar finds purchase upon it, predicting its course. By the time the shadow lands, Alaya has already woven his Art. The spell crushes that portion of the ceiling, and the cat along with it. He watches as the shadow seemingly folds into itself in mere moments until it can no longer be seen, presumably crushed. The spell leaves only a small gap in the ceiling where the cat once was.

“Your rook is disposed of and the king checked. Was it not you who said that a mage that relies overmuch on his pieces loses the battle when the pieces are destroyed?” Alaya mocks. He returns his attention to Tōko, arm still extended

and palm open. Tōko returns to him a look of dissatisfaction.

“I’m touched that you remember that. I’ve walked right into your little magic trap of a building just to reminisce about old times right to the end. How could you have ever lost to that little twerp Shiki with something as potent as this place?”

“Had I been less careful, I would not have captured her alive, which was my objective. But for you, no such safeguards need hinder me.”

“I didn’t know you had it in you to go to such lengths for the body of a girl, Alaya.” She leans an arm heavily on the wall beside her. “I swear, you and Alba have no cinematic sense for suspense. Let me tell you how to do it. Firstly, the monster shouldn’t talk. Second, don’t explain what it is. Third, it can’t die.”

The last sentence brings a moment of realization to Alaya’s face before he looks back over his shoulder. Sure enough, hanging over the hole in the ceiling is the cat familiar, with no visible injuries to its credit.

“**SHUKU!**” Alaya lashes his arm out to aim his spell at the familiar as fast as he can, but it is no use. The familiar neatly skirts the spell as it jumps out of the way and toward the black-clad mage. Flying like a loosed arrow, the familiar opens its body up in the same shape of the mouth it had donned when consuming Alba, and a moment later, Alaya is caught in the cavity. Only a faint intake of breath, an indication of surprise perhaps, escapes Alaya’s lips before he is devoured and snapped cleanly in two by the creature’s jaw. Only Alaya’s shoulder and head remain, tossed aside violently by the thrice grown shadow and hitting the staircase, rolling downwards with low, dull thuds. Tōko observes the expression of dim horror that color his face in his final moments before speaking to herself.

“Mages really should read some Clausewitz along with their hermetic texts. That’s how you do a surprise attack, Alaya.” She pushes herself off the wall and starts to walk closer to her dispatched foe.

Until she hears a cruel, crunching noise. She ascribes it at first to some far off location, at least until deep crimson blood is expelled from her lips, coughed and vomited out. With vision growing steadily hazier, she casts her eyes downward, only to find an arm, conspicuously sticking out of her own body. Tōko Aozaki

doesn't know what to make heads or tails of it at first, but she soon comes to the realization that the arm wrapped thick with blood is a man's arm, and that the object its accompanying hand grasped is a heart.

Her heart.

And it is then that she finally realizes. From behind her, a voice whispers into her ear.

"You are correct. Insight can be found in the most unlikely places." The voice is burdened with great grief, regret, and hatred; Sōren Alaya's voice, without a doubt.

With blood escaping her mouth in narrow rivulets, Tōko asks, "That... was a puppet, wasn't it? A decoy—"

"Yes." Alaya holds her close, his eyes taking in the sight of her heart.

"But you are quite real. The fury in this heart is unmistakable. It is almost too beautiful to destroy." And yet, with an ease that makes the organ seem to have the consistency of nothing harder than a water bag full to bursting, he crushes the heart with his hand, and watches the blood seep through his fingers. "I divined the trick to your familiar. It did not come from the briefcase, did it? It was a mere projection."

The briefcase then collapses, the Art used to cloak its nature now gone. In its place lies a projector, still making noises as it settles clankily on the floor.

"Ingenious," he remarks. "An artifact of the *prima materia*, projecting a tangible creature. It is no wonder now why my Art was ineffective. It was foolish of me not to have seen it earlier."

Tōko doesn't waste her last breaths answering him. Only questions come to her lips; questions for her former friend and murderer.

"I didn't...get to finish earlier. The last question: What is it you desire, Alaya?"

"I do not desire."

They utter the same questions and confront the same answers that had haunted them for years, and the familiarity somehow gives Tōko the last force of will to

chuckle, each expelling of breath accompanied by blood blossoming in the air.

*I do not desire.* Tōko remembers the words. It didn't seem too long ago now when she was a Collegium whelp, and Alaya not much more than that. When a master asked the assembled neophytes the same question, they mentioned outlandish and fantastical dreams of glory and discovery. But Alaya expressed himself differently. *I do not desire.* Though the neophytes took it as a sign of a lack of avarice in him and laughed, Tōko found nothing to take lightly in that reply. Only a vague feeling of dread. He was right in the sense that he did not desire. He took ascension as a mission, beyond the petty godly ambitions of other mages, and into something more personal that he hid well within him: a deep and abiding hatred for the paradox of humanity.

"Alaya...there's one last piece of advice you need to know."

"I will listen. Hurry, you have precious few seconds left."

"You don't know what you're trying to kill with this experiment." The only strength Tōko has left she directs to her speech, and her mouth moves in quivering movements that slur her speech somewhat. "Gunning for the Akashic Record means you're going to have to take down the Deterrent, the combined consensus of humanity's will, and the world's tendency for homeostasis."

"And what of it?"

Tōko's choking and coughing fills the air, but she says her next statement as clearly as she can. "Think real hard about which of the two forces you're really fighting."

"A joke, surely. I have long since accepted my conflict with humanity's unified unconscious will."

"That's the tune of about six billion people. Do you think you control all of them, right up to their death? Do you think your conviction will make you win?"

"I do," he replies abruptly, without hesitation or exaggeration. *The worst part*, Tōko thinks, *is that Alaya may actually be able do it.* The confidence of his declaration, despite the knowledge of his difficult undertaking, says as much. The last hope she can have is a faint one, but she places her faith in it nonetheless: the sheer force of paradox that may shatter his path to hubris in a

manner even he could not have accounted for.

“I pity you, Alaya.”

“Why?” He asks, but before he is able to receive an answer, Tōko’s life finally expires before him, leaving the body a worthless husk. Alaya thinks it a shame to allow her brain to rot away as the rest of her body. *Better to preserve it, perhaps. And then study it.* He withdraws the arm that pierced through Tōko’s flesh and places it atop the head, the other hand firmly grasping the dead face. With a simple twist, and the sound of crunching bone, he severs the head, leaving the body to fall lazily down against the floor.

Holding the head on one hand, he retreats to the wall Tōko previously leaned on, the same wall from whence he came. Despite Tōko’s best efforts, she never fully understood this building and its genius design. It is beyond an extension of Alaya’s will, it *is* him; his paradigm made flesh from floor to ceiling and every speck of space. Entering the wall like water meeting water, he disappears.

## Chapter 15

I recall the day I came across the scene of carnage.

I walked upon the earth of that scarred and solitary place, and my feet tread not on pebbles but on the fragments of bones. The wind carried on it the inescapable stench of death, seemingly threatening to cover the world entire.

It was a time of great upheaval and conflict, when men yet took to arms in the press of swords and pike, and when they knew the face of death by looking into an opponent's eyes. War followed everywhere one went, and everywhere it left a trail of men, cruelly discarded. And ever the proof of the freedom of the strong harrying the weak was visible to all who still had eyes to see.

It was no longer a question of who killed whom, or if the battle was just; only a problem of who died, and whether someone bore witness to final breath. Where I heard battle was joined, I followed. Where insurrection brewed, my feet carried me. Sometimes, I arrived when the battle was yet fresh, sometimes when the struggle was long concluded. But always, the same result: the reaper's work in droves.

It comes for us all no matter how much a father lends a shout of surrender to heaven, or how much a mother cries for her son, or how much that son dies smiling even as it expires from hunger. It steals into our private rooms, when candles are snuffed and the shadows grow larger, rendering the struggle of virtuous men meaningless.

And though I knew all of this, my travels continued. Yet all I saw bid my memory to ever return to that scene of carnage. They couldn't be saved. Men

cannot be saved, though their prayers to supernal beings would say otherwise. For man is a creature not meant to be saved but to end, hiding the dread of the past with the despair of the now. And in realizing this, I awakened to my own uselessness.

I cannot save any man, for I too am a man. But if that is what is fated, then perhaps I may be admitted, at least, to record death, to craft a morbid history of observance that suggests the cycle of souls. I would make a proof of lives ended and suffered.

And so my chronicle of death began.

The man wakes to a drop of water, then the sound of hissing steam. Sōren Alaya stands up silently, feeling dazed as if waking from a dream.

“I did not know I still saw dreams. A remnant from the past, dear though it is,” the mage confides to himself. But he is not alone. Around him, in a fashion, are the “residents” of the apartment building, and closer beside him is a jar shaped glass container, sealed and held near like a prize. It is filled with a liquid, and floating peacefully within is a single head, eyes shut in the manner of sleep. Tōko Aozaki’s head.

The sound of rising vapor pierces the silence yet again. The only light in the room emanates from the flat iron surface placed in the center of the room, its red hot glow warding the shadows away in its vicinity.

The mage has nothing to do now but wait. Both Shiki Ryōgi and Tōko Aozaki have been taken care of, their bodies destroyed or—in the case of Shiki—rendered immovable until such time that it serves its purpose. No one is left in any capable position to threaten him. So he waits.

“Alaya!” Announcing his presence, the red coated mage calls out to him as he enters the room unbidden. “Why do you delay here? You can’t slacken when there are things yet left to attend to.”

“It is finished, Cornelius. There is no need to ransack Aozaki’s sanctum. And though I have released Tomoe Enjō, he will not pose trouble to us. Learn to recognize these things and accept them.”

“Granted on both counts. But the question of Shiki Ryōgi still remains. You’ve

only rendered her unconscious, correct? If she wakes up, she will obviously try to escape. We don't have time to deal for such an eventuality when it happens, so maybe it would be wise to watch over her?"

"Baseless fear and nothing more. She is not simply confined to a room, free to wander. I have contained her in the space between spaces, a pocket realm within the structure. That is what the Art I wove her is designed to perform, after all. That besides, her body is weak, and even if she regained her consciousness, she can expend only little effort to escape. She will not run."

Cornelius looks on Alaya's consistently troubled face with a look of dissatisfaction. "Fine. I will take your word for it. I don't even care about the Ryōgi girl anyway. I took your offer for different reasons, if you will remember." His glance wanders to the glass canister placed on the table beside Alaya. "This isn't what you promised, Alaya. You said I would be the one to kill Aozaki, or was that a lie?"

"You missed your chance and you have paid for it. I had no choice but to strike her down."

"Strike her down? Don't make me laugh. I know better than you the nature of those canisters. That thing yet lives. Perhaps a soft spot still exists beneath that hardened exterior of yours, eh?"

Cornelius' question only elicits a low hum from Alaya which he cannot determine as a sign of assent or disagreement. Both of them know, however, that Tōko Aozaki is, in a sense, still alive. Her brain, at any rate. It is only unable to speak or to think. If that can be called a state of living, then it is them who recognize it as such.

"Looks like I'm not the only one that missed his chance," he insinuates. "Remember the Collegium, Alaya. She was the Wild Red, or so people called her in fear in the past. Always the fox, ever cunning. If anyone would have plans designed to be set in motion even beyond the grave, it would be her. We should kill her."

"What a fool you are to even utter that title of disrespect against her, Cornelius."

"Wh...what?" The red coated mage's words falter. Alaya ignores the

momentary lapse and takes the glass canister beside him in hand, extending it towards Cornelius. “Take it and go, if it will satisfy our promise. I care not what perversions you desire to visit upon it.” He hands it to the mage without reservation. Cornelius takes the overlarge canister with both hands, his eyes seemingly lost in the great gift being offered to him and his face barely able to hold back a wide grin.

“And I will gladly take it. So you do not care what I do with it, correct?” “Do as you will. For indeed, you have already written your own fate.” Alaya’s silent but heavy words fall on deaf ears. Cornelius is positively overtaken with glee as he starts to walk out of the room, satisfaction coloring the sound of his every step.

## **Paradox Spiral - VI**

Metal bolts feel like they're being hammered into my head in a steady metronomic pattern. The headache becomes worse every minute. Yet right now, I can't seem to focus on it. With wildly chattering teeth, I hug my knees and lean against the wall in a fetal position, slipping in and out of recollection as I stare blankly at the opposite wall.

Goddamit. Has it been hours since the madness in the Ōgawa Apartments, or only a few minutes? I can't keep track anymore.

Ryōgi fought Alaya, and I stood there still as stone unable to do anything except watch. Alaya died, that much I could see at first. Ryōgi plunged the knife in his chest and neck, as deep as it would go. It would be a monstrous thing for him to survive that kind of assault. But he did. I saw the knife stuck to the base of his neck slide ever so slightly outward. I watched in a state of simultaneous disgust and morbid fascination as his muscle, moving by its own volition, slowly forced the intruding blade out of his own flesh, until finally the knife fell to the floor and bounced lightly toward me with a neat metallic sound.

Then with a subtle drawing of air, as though he had never stopped doing it, Alaya breathed again. The sound of the knife brought me back to consciousness. As Alaya didn't seem to be moving, nor indeed to be taking notice of me, I assumed it would be fine to carefully crawl towards the knife and take it. I held it with both hands and looked back up at Alaya's stock still figure, only to find his fearful eyes meeting mine.

Without thought, I screamed, dispelling any thoughts of me using that knife to

make good on Ryōgi's sacrifice. In a daze, I ran. Ran as fast as I could, thinking that Alaya would chase after me, and that if he did that, I was certainly a dead man. But it didn't happen, and I escaped the building gasping for breath but not stopping until I reached the motorcycle parked outside. With it, I fled and tried to get as far away from that tower's looming shadow as possible. And so I came here, back to Ryōgi's room, the owner of which has just been captured...or killed.

I'd always found the room to be a bit drab, but it brings me a sense of security now, however false it may be.

Goddamit. Word of the night. It keeps repeating itself inside my head, an admonition of how much scum I am. Because in the end, like a coward, I left Ryōgi there to die. I saw my parents, or whatever they were die again right in front of me, but it's not registering all that well on my mind. I saw my nightmare realized before my eyes and I don't rightly know what to feel about it yet. At least I found out what they really were, but the events of the past hours have wiped my mind clean of any thought except one.

“Goddamit.” I whisper it now. My trembling won't stop, even though right now I can be sure I'm alone. Hah. Alone. What has my isolation served me up to now? What can I really do alone? Not help Ryōgi out, that's for damn sure.

“Goddamit!” I yell, each syllable a mocking sound that worsens the pain in my head. Thinking about saving Ryōgi is suicide if it means I have to fight Alaya. And how can I even do that when even the memory of that man makes me draw in closer, makes the shadows just that more threatening? No, I'm in no state to even entertain the thought of rescuing her.

There is the sound of highly tuned and repeating clockwork emanating from a place I can't trace. Pain shoots through my arm. Must've hit it on something when I was running. I'm tired. So tired. The headache won't stop, the pain in my joints has been going on forever, and even breathing doesn't seem to come any easier to me, and it becomes so hard to bear that a tear streaks down my cheek. With my knees held close, I start to cry alone and with pitiful mumbles. In the end, just like other people, I never escaped being fake. I wanted so much to be real like Ryōgi, but it turns out you can't run from what you are.

I had the one final chance to be real. My eyes find themselves dwelling on the bed, the usual sight of a sleeping Ryōgi somehow disquieting. In her place is the sword that she had assembled and casually thrown to the bed just a few hours ago. She saved me. She believed me when I said I was a murderer, even made it sound like it wasn't so bad, and it made me want to be with her, like kindred. It's the last thing about me that isn't false, and I cling to it. She's done so much, and I can't leave her just like I did.

"What—", I whisper, finding many ways to finish the question in my head. What am I busting my ass for? What am I trying to protect? What the hell am I thinking? I'm not really sure just yet at this point, but it's the first time I've thought of not looking out for myself. Ryōgi represents something more and something bigger than I am. I ran from my house the first time with blood on my hands and needing someone. She gave that to me, and now she needs me.

*Then will you die for me?* Her question returns to me, and I remember the confidence in me when I said my answer. I guess I already know what I have to do. Then what the fuck am I sitting around on my ass here for? Even if it's borne from false conviction, I need to stand up and get out that door. "I know what I said, Ryōgi. And if it helps you any, I'm gonna die for you," I whisper to myself as I retrieve the knife that she once used, hoping I hold it with the same firmness with which she did.

I begin to take a step towards the door when the doorbell rings loud and clear, piercing the pervasive silence that had blanketed the room since I went inside. I freeze instantly, and raise the knife in the futile emulation of a defensive stance. Did Alaya follow me after all, or is it just a visitor? No, I know Ryōgi doesn't get any visitors. Alaya then. Do I stay silent and pretend no one's home? No, Alaya won't be driven away that easily. Fuck it, I decided to do this, and I'll do it. I'll attack him the instant I open the door. Maybe I'll kill him, or at least drive him away for now. Fat chance, but the only chance I've got.

I hold the knife raised and at the ready, approach the door, and then turn the doorknob. I swing the door open wildly and as fast as I can, catching the man on the other side of it with a grapple with my free hand. I immediately drag and throw him inside the room. He hits the linoleum floor hard, and I close the door shut with a swift nudge of my heel. Pressing my advantage while he's still

confused, I sit myself on top of him, raise the knife above me—  
—and stop.

The man lying dazed and blinking below me, with his black framed glasses and similarly black hair, doesn't look even remotely threatening. And though he certainly looks a bit older than me and wears a weirdly all-black ensemble, he looks far from hostile; in fact, he looks more annoyed than anything. I look at him suspiciously as I whisper, "Who the fuck are you? You and Ryōgi know each other?"

"Yeah. And you're Shiki's, what, friend?" he asks with a tone that would make you think he hadn't been pulled and forced down hard to the floor only moments earlier, but instead had just met me on the street.

"Me? I, er—" What could I answer? "Fuck that. The important thing is, Ryōgi's not here. Get your ass back home." I stand up, allowing him to leave, but he doesn't, instead staring intensely at my hand. "What, fall got you bad? Look, I'm sorry for the violent greeting, alright? But I don't have time to be messing with you just now."

"That's Shiki's knife. What's it doing with you?" he asks, his voice gaining a sudden sharpness. There is only a small pause before I can lie.

"She lent it to me for safe-keeping. No business of yours." I try to look at something else while I say this, determined not to let him read me, but it's useless. He stands up and looks at me straight.

"It is my business. She barely lets anyone lay so much as a finger on any of her blades, let alone that particular knife. Either Shiki changed that particular policy overnight—" He grabs my shirt collar with a force I didn't expect. "—or you took it from her somehow. Excuse me for thinking it's the latter."

I fling off his hand from my collar as I look away from him again, not because I didn't want him to read my face, but because I couldn't stand to look at the honesty in his eyes.

"It's not either. The truth is, she dropped the knife, which is why I need to hurry up and give it back." I turn my back on him and head back inside the room to prepare what I need to bring when I leave.

“Wait, so you’re not one of them?” I hear him ask from behind me. I was all set to ignore him, but there’s something in his question that bugs me. “Which ‘them’ are we talking about here?”

“The weirdos from the Ōgawa Apartments.” The mention of the ominous name caresses my mind like a soft whisper, and it stops me in my tracks. Briefly, I entertain the thought that he could be bluffing, but why would he? In the end, he interprets my lack of an answer in his own way.

“It’s true, then,” he sighs heavily. “Shiki really has been kidnapped.” He heads for the door.

“Hey!” I call out to stop him. If I’m right, I know what he’s planning to do. But I can’t let him go alone. For one, I’m pretty happy that I could have found what may be a potential ally and here he is about to run off alone when we have the same objective. I cross the room back toward the door. “Hey, hold up!” I say as I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him before he goes out the door. Again we find ourselves in front of the doorway, but this time, I hope, in a much more different footing.

It was easy enough to make him listen once I told him we wanted the same thing, and so we explained our situations, both of us strangely forgetting to share each other’s name. Without going into too much detail, he explained that he’s a friend of Shiki’s from their high school days. Apparently, a red-coated man named Alba declared to him earlier this afternoon that they had Ryōgi.

At first I found it strange that it happened in the afternoon when me and Ryōgi definitely went to the building at night, but when I look at the clock beside her bed, it shows the time as around seven o’clock in the evening, which means that I’ve been in this room for almost an entire day and I never even noticed it until I snapped out of it.

He explained that he knew a woman named Tōko that went to the Ōgawa Apartments for him, and he said he trusted her to get Ryōgi back. But with so much time having passed, he suspected that she might have been taken by surprise and could be captured or killed as well. Left alone, he couldn’t sit on his ass and wait and instead decided to take action by himself.

I explained everything about what happened last night. About the apartment's east and west building. The two units that I supposedly used to live in. How Ryōgi was captured by Alaya. And reluctantly, I told him about the parents I killed, and the time when Ryōgi found me wandering around the city. Throughout the entire thing, he listens without flinching or casting any doubt on me, even when I, at the center of all this craziness, think that the words coming out of my mouth seem almost like a late punch line to a long-stale joke.

After I explain my situation, he wears a dead serious look, and asks me, "So what do you think about all of it?"

"Doesn't really matter right now. The important thing right now is to go get Ryōgi out of that place."

"I'm not talking about her right now, am I? I'm asking about your parents. Which of them do you think was real?"

I haven't even given that matter too much thought, and yet here he is worrying about it as if it was his own problem. Unbelievable.

"It doesn't make any difference. Just leave it be for now."

"Actually, it might make a difference. If what Tōko said is true, then that apartment complex is liable to make you crazy just by being in it. It might not even be your fault that you killed your parents. Maybe it's just the building messing you up." His eyes don't wander away from mine, sharp eyes with a different, even opposite intensity than Ryōgi's. What he said doesn't help me, though. I know what these hands did.

"No. I killed them, that much is true. It's time I accepted that. I can't ever wash my mom's blood off my hands. Running from that only makes me a coward."

"Well, how about your dad? So far you've only been saying stuff about your mom. Look back closely. Maybe you only killed your mother."

"Fucking give it up already! He's dead, alright! I saw his fucking corpse so—" I hesitate. I saw his corpse for sure, but was it really me that killed him? If I go back to that night in my head, I remember real clear how it went with mom, but now that I think about it, I don't remember how I killed dad at all. Maybe because, just like the story those half-year old bodies me and Ryōgi found in the

east building told...

...mom had already killed him. The same way the fake mom of the fake Enjō family in the other end of the building is surely killing him again this very moment, surely killing the fake me in the next minute or so, every night without fail.

So I was never running from a terrible dream. Only running from an even worse reality, and I with these hands, I tried to end it. It takes me a while to notice that my teeth are beginning to chatter.

“Leave it be, for chrissakes,” I try to say emphatically, but it comes out as more nervous than I’d intended. “Maybe you’re forgetting what we’re actually here for.” I shelve the thought of my parents in my head for a while. I certainly have more time to deal with that later. “So you got a plan, right? If you were planning to go alone in the first place, then you should have something up your sleeve.”

“Well, maybe,” he says hesitantly. “I dunno, maybe we take this to the blue uniforms or something.”

What the hell is he on?

“Oh, sure let’s just call them up and say we’ve got ourselves some magic problems. And even if they do believe us, there’s hardly any time left. Are you serious?”

He shrugs with an indication that that was the answer he was expecting. “Not really, but I had to hear it from you straight. Look, you’re obviously in a bit of a hurry to bust in without a plan there, but be realistic here. I know Shiki’s important, but you’re life is just as valuable, and you only got the one.”

“Hah! You were ready to do the same thing minutes ago. As if you would understand. There’s nothing for me. No one to help me, and no one else I can help—except Ryōgi. I swore I’d help her, you know. And you better bet I’m gonna do exactly that. It’s the last—”

I feel a lump in my throat rising, and somehow I can’t finish the sentence, and I get the same feeling I got when I swore to Ryōgi at knife point. I only want to help her, maybe even to die helping her. There’s no point in living a life full of

worrying, constantly looking over my shoulder without a reason to keep me going. No, I'm done. But dying doesn't need to be worthless. The last thing that can give me meaning is saving Ryōgi. After all, what better way to go out than to die for the girl you like? This guy...he knows what I'm about. He knew what I wanted to do even before I said it, with those pointed eyes of his.

"Well, I don't know if you catch my drift," I mutter weakly. It's the only thing left I can say. He stands up from the floor slowly and without a sound. "Mmm... maybe I do, maybe I don't. But we'll soon find out, won't we? Before we get Shiki back, we've got to go to this place I know first. Just follow my lead, Tomoe Enjō."

He rushes toward the door, opens it, and gets out faster than I can ask him how he knows my name, and soon the question fades from my mind as I follow him back out into the city's cradle of night.

Me and the guy walk away from Ryōgi's apartment, going to the nearest train station in the busy commercial district. I follow him as we ride in a direction that unexpectedly goes away from the Ōgawa Apartments, and eventually we get off at a lazy station. This is a residential project part of town very much far from the madding crowd of downtown. Even the station, with its unmaintained flooring and lack of turnstiles, would seem deserted if not for the occasionally flickering fluorescents providing it with lighting. In front of it stand two small, quaint convenience stores standing in solemn company, though it looks like they're without customers right now and are dead for the night.

"This way," the guy in the glasses says after studying the local street layout in the station. He starts walking at a brisk pace, and I try to follow along as best as I can. We maintain our pace for a few minutes, him leading the way. No matter how far we go, I observe only houses to our left and right in various states of repair, all quiet with a light or two on, all of them probably having just finished dinner and the people already starting to wind down. Our steps on the concrete sidewalk are the only things we can hear, and it makes it seem as though the entire area is blanketed with some kind of vow of silence that we're violating. The streets are narrow, making the sidewalks even more so, and the darkness is held back only barely by the pools of light made by dim streetlights. The

occasional dumpster provides homes for stray dogs on the prowl, but elsewhere the streets are colored with human detritus.

I gather that this was the guy's first time in this neighborhood. At first I thought this side trip was to get some sort of preparation for rescuing Ryōgi, but now that doesn't seem to be the case. I've been generous with my silence ever since we left Ryōgi's apartment, but now I'm starting to get irritated. We really don't have the time to be taking a leisurely stroll. "Alright, cut the crap," I say, breaking the silence. "You can tell me where we're going now."

"Just a little further," he answers without looking over his shoulder. "Look, over there," he points a few houses farther in front of him. "It's a park. And then there's the empty lot right beside it."

As I follow him we eventually pass the park he referred to, which seems as deserted as the rest of the area, though somehow I imagine this one is similarly deserted in daytime. In it, there is a playground with the ground flattened, lacking the slide and jungle gym that's present in any half-decent playground. The poor excuse for bars that hold up the two swings are red with rust; nothing's been reflected off of them for years, probably.

"Wait a minute—" something flits by my mind.

*I know this park...* from the childhood memories that I compartmentalized in a part of my brain. There were memories there, memories of playing in the mud and sand. I stand stock still in front of the park, leaving the man to go on ahead, not noticing I'd stopped. He himself halts in front of a single house beyond the empty lot beside the park. After taking a moment to collect myself, I hurry and chase after him.

When I approach him, he looks back at me with sad, almost regretful eyes. Spurred on by that, I cast my gaze at the house that he had been staring at only a moment ago, now in front of both of us where I can get a better look.

My heart skips a beat.

It's a small, quaint bungalow. Half of the gate is gone, seemingly torn from the spot, and the other half a rusting iron mess. The small garden between the gate and the house is a chaotic mess of weeds grown tall and wild, encroaching upon the walls of the house, themselves suffering from chipped, peeling, or cracked

paint. A ruin. When was the last time a person lived within?

I try to speak but no words come. My eyes remain affixed on the longforgotten ruin, and unaware, I cry. Not a cry of sorrow, regret, or pain, but only a flow of tears that I am unable to stop. It's not the same. Everything's different. But the soul remembers. It's something I can hide but will never be able to forget, even ten, twenty, or thirty years on. This place will probably always catch up with me.

My first home.

The home I'd lived in until I was eight years old, but a life that seems an eternity and a day ago for me to almost forget.

*Tell me, Enjō. Where's home for you?* When I once answered that seemingly simple question, she looked unsatisfied, even disappointed as she shook her head. *That isn't what I asked. I'm asking about the place you really want to go back to. Well, if you don't know, can't say I didn't expect it.*

Is this what you meant, Ryōgi?

But what's in here except a decaying, collapsing ruin of a house? Only memories. For a while, I remember my parents as they were before I killed them: the abusive father that ruled like a king, and the acquiescent mother that would only say yes on command. The parents who gave me no food to warm my belly, or clothes to warm my body. The parents that did nothing except be a burden to me, and whose deaths I cared less for than Ryōgi. If that's all true, why am I still crying?

When I saw their dried husks in the Ōgawa Apartments, there was also a numbness similar to the numbness in me now, and I couldn't bring myself to move, like I'd forgotten something important and it haunted me. But now, with a difficulty that made my feet feel like they were in water, I walk past the gate, and into the small, cramped garden. It seemed bigger when I was a child.

The wideness of the garden; the father that patted me on the head with a laugh; the mother that saw me off to school wearing a smile; these are what I remember now. The reality of the now almost makes me doubt the truth of it, like you would when dreaming a dream good and true, but waking up to a something more a lie than the dream. But I know what my mind can call back, and all of it was no lie, only a clear happiness hidden inside the depths of neurons and firing

synapses.

*Tomoe*, I hear a voice say, somewhere in the past. When I turned around to face it, I saw the front door of the house, and the determined face of a man. *Come here. I'm going to give you something special.* A kid, still a boy, red-haired, and with a body thin like a girl's walked up to the tall man.

*What's this, dad?*

*The key to the house. Don't lose it, okay? Even though you're still just a boy, you can keep mom safe with that.*

*But it's just a key.*

*Exactly. The key to the house protects our family, so that even when mom and dad are out of the house, it'll be alright. It's proof of the fact that we're family, and we protect each other.*

How much could the boy have understood within the words of his father? And yet he took the key from his father's hand, grasping it firmly as he answered.

*I get it. I won't lose it. Don't worry, dad. I'll keep the house safe, even when I'm all alone.*

All strength leaves my legs, and I stumbled onto my back. I try to get up, but my legs refuse it. The memories are all so clear now. The key was important all because it protected my family, a proof that a family to protect even existed. And like a curse descending on us, the family started to fracture when I no longer remembered it.

The past—when my mom could still be kind, and my dad could still be good, when they both treasured their son—that was a more definitive truth. The time when the years passed, and that truth was lost, was when I decided that everything was a lie. I was a complete idiot. I only lived on the day to day, judging my parents as worthless because I thought they couldn't get themselves right. I isolated myself from their little gestures, from mom looking like she was trying to say something but couldn't every time I came home from work. But I never thought about what happened to them, how dad must have never gotten a job because he kept getting refused because of the record of that accident, and how the pressure of the people around him must have gotten to him. Or how

mom soldiered on despite the rumors and gossip that saw her gaining and losing minimum wage jobs over and over again. They did it for me, but I forgot this and became a criminal instead of a victim. I turned my back on them, and we forgot each other. Mom had it harder than me, being abused by dad at night and working silently by day, never having anyone to reach out to. We were all broken by the time I'd dirtied my hands with her blood, but she had the worst of it.

If I'd looked over my shoulder to talk to her just once, maybe...maybe we could have gotten through it all.

"Here I am. The ultimate selfish idiot." I cover my face, trying to stop the tears, or at least to hide them. Now's the time to own up for my sins in their memory. It wasn't the dream, or that crazy apartment that made me kill them. I did. I alone. I couldn't help them at all. But to atone for it, I had to go to Ryōgi, get her out—

I lower a tear-soaked hand to the soil I am sitting on, and grab a handful of dirt. The tears have stopped now, but the weight of their deaths still hang. I grip the soil tightly in my fist, almost ceremonially. My own last rites to conclude this little stopover. The wind stops; a signal for me to go. To start sprinting like I'd always wanted to, no longer to run from what I've done, but to see it to the end.

When I look at the ground, I see the shadow of the guy in glasses standing a few feet away from me, saying nothing but looking intensely at me as I collect myself. He was right. I had to come here. Because he knew that, I knew I could count on him as an ally. Besides, it's better than making enemies with the boyfriend of the girl you liked.

Without turning my head back I say, with a laugh, "Good entertainment watching me or what?"

Beside me, I see the shadow of him shaking his head bitterly. "Sorry. I knew your history, but I thought it wasn't right to say anything. I was lucky to be born in a good house with good parents, so it didn't feel right." A good guy, this. At least he knows the times when words said in comfort sound more like lies. But I also know not to turn down sympathy when I need it.

"Then keep the talking down, will ya? Gotta respect the moment, man. 'Sides,

I think I like you better not talking,” I say, still hard-pressed to stop my laughing.

“I do have to say this, though,” the guy starts to say, “and Lord knows I’ve been saying this to a certain someone more times than I care to count: if you think you’ve got nothing else left, then all you got is you. It’d be a big mistake to throw yourself away without good reason.”

The moonlight, so faint behind the cloudy night, nevertheless brightens the soil of the garden. I remember the night when I said to Ryōgi that I’d die for her, and she brushed it off like she didn’t want it. It’s only now that I realize that she was saying the same thing, and the fact that I’m being reprimanded by someone so different from her with the same essential argument is probably some kind of sign. The thought of it only makes me laugh even more.

“Think you can get up by yourself?” the guy asks as he extends a hand toward me. “Or do you need help?”

My laughing finally subsides. I look at the hand he offers for only a moment before I gently push it away. Even though all the joints in my body have been crying out in pain since the night before, my obstinacy has to be given some merit. And so Tomoe Enjō stands up.

“Thanks, but I don’t need it. After all, I’ve done everything alone up till now.” The man nods, pushing his glasses up a bit.

“Yeah, I guess I knew you’d say that.” For no apparent reason, he smiles. I return it.

We headed back to the guy’s house, an apartment in the downtown area, to get his car, which he’s currently driving at a steady if slow clip toward the Ōgawa Apartments. Stored inside his car is a duffel bag that has the tools we need for the task of rescuing Ryōgi.

He explains his simple plan as he drives. Going in by the front entrance is liable to get us noticed real easy. So this guy plans to be the bait by doing just that while I get to comb the place for Ryōgi, starting from the tenth floor, where she is most likely being kept since it’s the most inaccessible place. I get to be the one that finds Ryōgi simply by dint of the fact that Alaya would pay more

attention to someone he doesn't know going inside the building rather than me, who does know me and what little I can do to stop him directly.

"Still," I begin to ask, "wouldn't I just be spotted as easily as you would?" "Not if you go underground you won't. Here's a layout of the building." With one hand on the steering wheel, he reaches with the other hand inside his bag resting on my lap, taking out a large piece of paper and setting it above the bag for me to see. It shows the floor plan and cross section of the Ōgawa Apartments. He points to it. "Look here. The place has an underground parking lot. There's manhole access inside it, and you can get in from another manhole outside of the building. I don't believe the parking lot is actually used right now, so it should be clear."

It's true. Though the elevator in the building has a "B" button on it, it doesn't work, so I assumed it just wasn't built yet. He continues. "That's probably where they do all of the dirty work they need to keep that apartment running. Makes sense, since the noise won't escape and nobody would've suspected a thing."

"I'm guessing the jack, screwdrivers, crowbars, and manhole hook in here are for when I'm opening the manhole covers in and out?" I ask as I rummage through the duffel bag to see what else is inside it. The guy nods sternly.

A few more minutes pass, and we finally arrive at Kayamihama, the district of reclaimed land where the Ōgawa Apartments stand. He stops at an intersection about a kilometer away from the apartments, and we get off. With the time standing at ten o' clock, not a soul can be found wandering the streets, even though this is one of the more well-lighted parts of town. The guy points towards the road a fair distance from where we're standing.

"The manhole you need is a ways over there. When you're in, just follow the westward flow of the water and count the number of manholes above you as you go. The seventh one should be the exit leading to the underground parking lot."

"Yeah, yeah, I read the street infrastructure map inside the bag too, you know," I grumble as I double check the equipment inside the duffel bag. I reach for my pocket just to see if Ryōgi's knife is still there. From the car, I retrieve the sword we got from Ryōgi's room before we went here. If in case I face Alaya, it wouldn't hurt to have an abundance of weaponry at my disposal.

“Watches synchronized, right? At around 10:30, I go inside the building, while you should be in place to go through the parking lot,” he says without a hint of hesitation.

“You sound like you’re used to this sort of stuff.”

“Trust me, I’m not.”

“Then you gotta tell me what’s going on between you and Ryōgi for you to go this far for her.” And so I finally ask the question that’s long been sitting at the back of my mind. For a fleeting moment, I see the guy furrow his brow, but he refrains from answering. “Hey, we might die here! Aren’t you scared at all? Why do this? What are you to her?”

“Of course I’m scared. I’m not in the regular business of rescuing people.” He closes his eyes, and speaks in a low, almost cautious voice. “I’m obviously not built for this sort of thing. I’m risking my life. But then I remember the girl me and Shiki once met. Some fortuneteller kid who could see the future.”

“What?” That’s certainly a sudden change in topic.

“I remember that kid saying that if I continued to have anything to do with Shiki, I was putting my life at risk. Something would happen that would see me betting my life on some gamble for Shiki.” He says this without a laugh or even a self-mocking smile, and so I follow him with the same serious weight he gives it.

“So you think it’s what we’re doing now, then? So what did that kid have to say about your prospects of living?”

The guy only shakes his head and shrugs. “Well, she didn’t say anything about whether I’d die or not. So I guess that’s still in the cards, isn’t it? I just take it as a reason that I should just rush headlong into things for her. It’s a fortune waiting to be told.” Now he laughs. From what I can tell about the guy, that reason does seem strangely like him. Satisfied, I pick up the duffel bag and sling it over my shoulder. I’m going to need to run soon.

“Thanks,” I say with some awkwardness. “Oh, almost forgot. We haven’t introduced ourselves, right? The name’s Tomoe Enjō. You are?” I know that he already knows my name, but I say it anyway just so he’s forced to say his.

“Mikiya Kokutō.” The same name Ryōgi once mentioned in passing. “Hah. She’s right. Your surname *does* sound like the name of some poet I heard somewhere.” We shake hands, and through it, I hand a certain key to him; the key to Ryōgi’s room that I didn’t need any more. From where I stand, it almost looks like the similarly tiny piece of metal I once treasured. “What’s this?” he asks.

“Just take it. It’s you who needs to keep it safe from now on.” I try my best to make a genuine smile. I don’t know if I did. “When this is all over, we shouldn’t meet again. Don’t even try to find each other. Liking the same girl is reason enough to separate.”

The guy raises an eyebrow and tries to say something, but cuts himself off. Maybe he does understand.

“So that’s it,” I continue. “I don’t know you, and you don’t know me. Which is why afterwards, we shouldn’t worry about who died, and who was responsible, and all that.” I turn around and start to walk toward the manhole to start the whole thing. The guy sees me off. I turn around for the last time and wave my hand goodbye.

“See ya, buddy! I’m gonna start over once this is all done. I really love Ryōgi, but she doesn’t need me. She’s got you. I don’t think you’re particularly well-suited for each other, but hey, that’s life, right? I was glad that I could meet someone like her, someone like me. It’s why I know that guy’s like you are what us nutjobs need.”

I turn my back on him and sprint as hard and fast as my legs and lungs could carry me. I didn’t look behind me ever again.

## Chapter 15

Waiting until the time he and Enjō agreed upon, Mikiya Kokutō finally sets foot for the second time on the building's grounds. The path that runs through the garden seems to be deserted. The grass in the garden surrounding the path is as rightly emerald green as grass should be, but strangely lacking its distinctive smell. He passes through it and into the lobby, bright with its electric lighting.

Not a sound can be heard. The fluorescent lights make no reflection off of the immaculate surfaces of the singularly cream colored walls and floor, yet the entire place leaves no corner or nook left unlighted. When Mikiya last came here, it was still morning, and he had felt a sort of tepid disquiet. But this night visit is different. It's almost as if the building is pregnant with a suffocating stillness. Every step he takes produces an echo: minute, almost unheard, only for the sound to vanish into oblivion less than a second later. Now, the silence is chilling, oppressive, and close to being physically thick, making Mikiya's every step heavy. Like the building recognizes his foreign nature and works to expel him.

Still, he is decided, and can't back down now, not when there are people counting on him. Forcing his way through the thickness of the air, he proceeds through the lobby.

"Guess I should start with the third floor," he mutters. He decides not to use the stairs, as using the elevator would probably attract more attention, leaving Enjō to do the work he needed. So he pushes the up button beside the elevator door, and hears the low howling of the machine's activation. The lights above the door indicate that it's descending from the fifth floor. Before long, the door

starts to open silently, quite a contrast to its noise just moments before.

But even as the elevator door is starting to open, Mikiya already sees someone inside it. Without really knowing yet who it is, he gulps and takes a step back.

“Ah, so you’ve come. What perfect timing, too. I was just thinking of paying a visit to your master’s sanctum,” says the man in the blood red coat as a smile slowly spreads across his face. He steps out of the elevator with teetering steps, and holds something in one hand. His attention is solely affixed on it, facing it with an expression halfway between dread and joy. Mikiya looks at it, only to find a disgusting lump rising up in his throat. But he can’t look away from it.

“It is so perfect, is it not?” the man asks mockingly. “I think it has utterly captured my heart.” Now he laughs in apparent enjoyment as he flaunts the object he is holding. And still Mikiya can’t look away from it.

For the object the red coated man is holding in one hand is the head of Tōko Aozaki.

Tōko’s head is remarkably well preserved for the state it’s in. The flesh still holds some sort of living warmth, and it looks unchanged from when it was still alive. Their eyes closed in seeming slumber, and the untainted face look straight out of a painting, like she’s returned to some purer state of being. Except of course for the fact that she’s lost everything from the neck down.

With a hand pressed over his mouth, Mikiya tries to fight a losing battle against his urge to vomit, but it’s not going all too well.

“How admirable of you to have come to take revenge for your mentor. Aozaki must have inspired great loyalty in such a lowly apprentice for you to trouble yourself so. To be honest, it makes me jealous.” The smile in Alba’s face seems warped and distorted, as though it was a smile carried too far in the service of showmanship. “Obviously, your mentor has passed from us. But not completely. Oh no. She yet has ears to hear, nerves to feel, and a mind with which to understand. It is a mercy, to be sure. I did many things in the service of destroying this woman, and I intend to express my gratitude to her. No, I will have her cling to life for a while more, at least.”

He draws closer to Mikiya, each step a shuffle and a stomp, drunk in his own triumph. “Why, you might ask?” he hisses. “Because after years of defeat from this woman, it feels refreshing to finally become her better. Just killing her outright would be an insult to all the time leading up to this moment, an act better than she deserves. She will have to feel pain. Oh, don’t worry yourself, friend. She’s lost her entire body. She’s got much more serious problems to deal with than a little pain, I’m sure.”

Alba then lays the fingers of his other hand in Tōko’s face in a gentle caress. Then he takes two fingers and, with a sudden thrust, inserts them forcefully into both eye sockets, forcing fresh blood out as he draws out the familiar eyeballs from their now open cavities. The cheeks of Tōko’s face are bathed in streams of red tears. Separated from their owner and soaked in her own blood, the eyeballs look different and alien to Mikiya now. Only two globular pieces of meat. Alba holds out the hand holding the eyeballs toward Mikiya, gesturing for him take it.

“You see?!” the red-coated man says in a half-crazed shout. “That must have hurt, but she didn’t even make a sound! But worry not, for she still feels pain as surely as we do. Her mind tells her so. Aozaki was always a stubborn one, but I wonder how she feels about her eyes being gouged out? Does it hurt, Aozaki? Enough to make you cry blood, evidently.” He turns his attention away from the head and back to Mikiya. “You! What do you think? You’re her apprentice so you must understand how she feels. Well? Can you?!”

Mikiya doesn’t answer him. The scene is enough to numb him to inaction, let alone think anything except how to process the spectacle before him and how to survive this encounter. Alba looks on, affirming his satisfied look with a chuckle.

“In truth, however, I would have wanted to make her suffer not just pain, but the humiliation of being reduced to her current state. No matter. I can do something better anyway, but I need you.” He looks back at Mikiya again. “I wonder, how would you feel if something you’d built, cherished, and cared for is destroyed right before your very eyes, as you sit there, helpless and unable to even scream. If it were me, I certainly wouldn’t be able to take it. Not even killing the person who did it would be enough, oh no. Do you see it now, Aozaki?” He turns back to Tōko’s head. “I want you, who has only given me indifference, to feel enough hatred to want to kill me. The best revenge I could

hope for. Though Alaya has robbed me of the role of plunging my arms deep into your breast and pulling out your heart, this opportunity is still more than I deserve!"

As he continues to talk to the severed head, he suddenly grabs it with both of his hands, and returns his attention to Mikiya. "The moment I discovered Aozaki had an apprentice, I was so happy I couldn't contain myself. I've had my eye on you since we met. Curse not me but your mentor for making you known to me. Ah, but worry not. You will not join her just yet in hell. Though I said this head yet lives, we have reached the point where we must first make a small adjustment—"

He grins as wide as he can muster. Then, with a great force, he takes the severed head in between his two hands and squeezes it as a vise would. In only a few moments, the thing that was Tōko Aozaki compresses, blood pouring out of fissures in the skin from Alba's strong grip, until finally it is shattered into an unrecognizable pile of meat and blood that falls to the ground.

"—Tada! And now she's dead! It's magic!" And then the red-coated man laughs with a vigor that fills the once silent lobby.

Without a word, Mikiya books it, the sickening display repeating itself in his mind and burning away any sense or reason he still clung to. Not thinking where to go, he directed himself to the east building's lobby. His mind can't bring up the memory of the last time he went there, or the details of the room. It is, in fact, a supreme effort for him to just keep from screaming.

"It's time to end this show, I think!" Alba calls after him. "Don't worry! You will follow soon enough!" His laughter fades, and he starts to follow after Mikiya at a leisurely pace, the hands swinging at his sides dripping with fresh blood and scraps of meat.

The sewer twists and turns, mazelike in its complexity. With no light in place to guide him, and only the steady flow of the sewage to return his mind to the passage of time, Tomoe wanders the dank passages. Luckily, Mikiya gave Tomoe everything he needed, including a map of the sewer infrastructure and a flashlight. Eventually, through these, he manages to reach the place where he's

supposed to be in. Above him now lies the manhole he needs. He turns off the flashlight and sets the duffel bag down leaning on the wall, careful not to let it be carried away by the stream of sewage. He fishes around for a crowbar from the bag, and then climbs the ladder steps embedded into the sewer wall, going up a height he can't determine.

Tomoe's head hits something metallic, which is all the sign he needs. He feels around with one hand for the gap he needs to slide the crowbar into, then inserts the hook end into it carefully. Finding purchase, he pushes to open the gap wider. Then, with what strength he can muster, he pushes with his shoulder until the cover finally gives way, flipping across the floor with a hard metallic gong. He sticks his head out of the whole to find the entire parking lot similarly dark. Satisfied, Tomoe goes back down to retrieve the bag, then climbs back up and tosses it up first. Next comes Shiki's sword, then finally himself.

Without a light to guide his bearing, he pauses for a moment to listen to his surroundings. A strange feeling steals its way into him: that of being there no threat to actually discover him even as he sneaks around. The feeling of complacency. Though with the vastness of the parking lot, coupled with the darkness, Tomoe should have every reason to be comfortable in that feeling. From somewhere nearby, he hears the sharp hissing of steam echoing through the vast emptiness.

“The sound...of steam?” he whispers to himself as recalls something vague in his mind he thought he’d cast away. This particular darkness and the smell in the air are both known to Tomoe. Worse, they are familiar, tinged with the feeling of stepping over the threshold of one’s house.

His bones ache as if in response to that familiarity, and the sound of their trembling is worsened by his mind, replaying them over and over again. He studies his perimeter yet again, and this time finds a beacon glow in the distance, a warm orange light that calls to him. When Tomoe sees it, he suddenly feels hot, as if his mind just caught up to the real temperature of the room. His feet draw him closer to the orange light in the center of everything, and he starts to hear the faint sound of the hissing noise he’d heard before.

As Tomoe edges deeper into the room, his eyes start to adjust to the darkness. Along the walls to his side are large canisters, arranged in an order he can’t yet

discern. The floor is littered with long, narrow tubes that lead to somewhere undetermined. And still, not a soul makes its presence known. The company Tomoe keeps now is only the sound of rising steam, and the noise of water boiling, both of which are getting increasingly louder with each step toward the center of the room. Both noises echoing in the confines of Tomoe's past.

Saying nothing, he walks with a heavy pace that matches his body's sudden weight. He is nearing the limits of his stamina. He is closer to the glow now, now able to see where it emanates from: a glowing hot metallic plate. Every so often in regular intervals, an amount of water is set to pour on top of it, boiling it and turning it instantaneously into a mist of steam floating up to the ceiling. The ceiling itself, as far as Tomoe can see, is filled with a complex series of pipes absorbing the steam and funneling it into the canisters in the sides of the room through which they are connected. A respiratory system.

Tomoe unconsciously does a nervous laugh as he sees this, and his curiosity takes him to the prominently displayed canisters. There are countless numbers of them, each about a head big. Though he can't see them just yet, Tomoe notices that something is floating within the formaldehyde solution contained within the canisters. And finally he sees them. Brains. Human brains.

The tubes he had seen before on the floor are the same ones in the ceiling, spreading their length around the room but all ultimately connected to one canister, and all ultimately leading upwards and through the ceiling of the underground parking lot. *Probably connected to all the other rooms in the apartment buildings*, thinks Tomoe.

"Like a cheap dime novel horror," he remarks quietly with a smile, and then walks along the perimeter of the wall. He should have thought of it before. There was no way the people here lived the same yesterday, down to the detail, every day of the month. It'd only be cause for suspicion to anyone outside looking in too closely, which Alaya obviously didn't want. Instead, they will have small changes, little details that change every day. But the day, for the most part, progressed in a similar spiral. A time to wake up, a time to eat, a time to play, a time to work, and a time to die and live again. And for this, they needed them to be, on some level, alive. Though Tomoe finds it hard to conceive of the situation —bodies animated by remotely stored human minds—that is what he beholds

before him. Every day these minds are forced to live a closed loop of impermanent death and uncertain rebirth, living only to die in the night, experiencing it with the disconnect that comes from the mind and body being separate. A particular brand of hell if Tomoe ever saw one: A prison for the soul made to resemble some crude facsimile of life that didn't get the point, repeating the same dream until the sleepers can no longer distinguish dream from reality. Like the nightmare that kept plaguing Tomoe Enjō every night.

Tomoe brushes his fingers lightly on the cold surface of one of the canisters. "Hah...I see how it is now," he mutters, as the canister sends a chill running from his arm to his body. At that moment he hears a voice—no, not a voice; more akin to a communicating consciousness, emanating from the object. Did he imagine it? Regardless, it communicates only one thing.

*Save me.*

Tomoe chuckles despite the intrusion in his mind. After all, what could he save? Does it want to return to its original form, or perhaps escape from the cycle it's trapped in? Either way, both are impossible tasks.

"All I've proven I can do is kill," says Tomoe, amused at his own irritatingly cheerless observation. "Besides, even I wanted to be saved. Problem was, I didn't know what I wanted to be saved from. Probably better that way, since there was no way to save me in the end, even if we stretch the meaning of the word. I've had the impulse to kill boiling up inside me from the start, and now I'm past the point where saving mattered," he utters almost apologetically.

Now, Tomoe sets about rummaging among the canisters scattered along the wall, trying to find the one that curiosity and logic tells him he should be able to find. The lack of it would be even more strange than its presence. The mage Alaya didn't kill anyone to procure these brains for his sick experiment, only harvested them after their owners all did the deed to each other. That's why the one thing that is the source for Tomoe Enjō's repeating dream—or the reality that occurred half a year ago—should lie somewhere in this pile. And sure enough, within a few short minutes, he finds the canister he was looking for. He didn't want it to exist, but everything pointed to it, and now, he doesn't know what to feel.

He smiles a twisted smile as he touches it gently, fascinated as one would be when looking at a mirror that reflects him twisted and wrong. Finally, the proof is laid out before him. He looks upon himself. Two tubes extend out of it. One reaches upward to the ceiling, but the other is cut. A faulty machine, a discarded piece of equipment thrown out from the comforting safety of the regularity it once knew.

At that point, almost on cue, a sharp sound breaks through the repetitive sound of the steam, and Tomoe looks to its source: the left elbow that had pained him most among the other parts of his body since yesterday. From there, he casts his eyes downward, and he sees what made the sound. His left arm, elbow to fingertips, fallen to the floor.

He never felt it slough off. Blood red liquid oozes and drips from the newly torn limb. He looks inside the cavity of what remains of his arm, and sees that among the things that look like skin and bone contained within, it also sports objects seemingly shaped like cogs and gears. They tick, louder and more incessantly now, like an annoying clock, the sound of them strangely familiar, and almost comforting. A sound he has heard on many an occasion beforehand. Tomoe hears the ticking as some old memory, like another name for him, asserting what he really is: the person who killed his mother to ward off a nightmare, and, dancing to the invisible strings, ran from his act in shame is

“...me.”

Tomoe’s mind blanks, and he cannot prevent himself from falling to the floor on his knees. He giggles quietly, privately, but then it builds to the boisterous yet disturbing laugh of a madman, reverberating across the expanse of the empty parking lot.

“This is ridiculous,” Tomoe says with difficulty. “Right from the start, right from the fucking start, I was already a phony.”

He cannot think of anything else. Only the revelation that, on some level he had always known, fills him with a laugh of self-ridicule he can no longer contain.

*It’s was all bullshit,* Tomoe thinks to himself. *I...me and my family had zero chance of avoiding that tragedy, even if we repeated the damn act a million*

*times. We had no way of changing how it all would end. We're all just fakes, manipulated by Alaya. He knew I couldn't do anything, and let me run.*

The ceaseless ticking in his arm and the multitude of ethereal voices from each mind crying out to him for help are all infuriatingly annoying. Irritating. Making him lose concentration. A maddening cacophony forcing him to slip away from the solid truth that he had just learned, the truth he sought for so long: that everything is a lie. In desperation, he edges closer to the glowing metal plate in the center of the room, the voices getting louder every second. He raises his torn off left arm and presses it onto the searing hot surface of the metal plate.

Tomoe screams an animal scream, a guttural noise of anguish beyond comprehension. The stump of his left arm sizzles and smokes. The blood stops flowing, the wound cauterized. The ticking fades. The voices are slowly silenced. The pain shoots well through his entire arm and fires up seemingly every nerve in his body. But it is only for a few precious moments. Afterward, he raises his arm from the metal plate, traces of burnt flesh coloring its edges. He may have already gone mad. But—at least for now—he finds resolve, and remembers the real reason he has come back to this place of madness.

Gasping for breath and sweating harder than he ever had before, Tomoe searches desperately for the elevator and finally finds it in a corner of the room. The light indicates it has stopped in the first floor. He pushes the up button and calls the machine down. Double checking the knife in his pocket, and slinging the sword over the shoulder of his good arm, he goes inside. He looks back over his shoulder at the room that challenged him, the room now filled only with the disturbing regularity of the sound of the water and the hiss of steam, and blanketed otherwise by silence so total that no one except the sleeping, dreaming souls wrapped in their lie of a life may hear the final moments of one who would die here.

*Which is the real spiral: the never-changing life, or the never-ending life? This building is a machine that is wrapped in both sides of infinity, where even dying isn't a permanent setup. You just get free do-overs the next day. It's a perfectly maintained cycle. I wonder if the cycle had some kind of flaw, would my mother still have killed me? Would I still kill my mother? It's an impossible question to answer. It wouldn't be the same life. This entire place is built on the death of*

*others. Without that, this place has no meaning.*

Still, how I wish this spiral had a paradox.

He makes an impossible wish with no answer. Tomoe feels his entire body screaming towards its final hour, but he still manages to push the button to take him to the tenth floor.

Mikiya Kokutō keeps running as hard as he can, past the point where his breathing can keep up. He spares no moment to look back and see if Alba is following him. Finally, he finds that his feet have taken him inside the east wing lobby, and he stops.

A dead end? He thinks, incredulous. Sure enough, aside from the stairs that leads to the second floor balcony, the place has nowhere else to go except where he came from. Stopping here, and realizing that Alba isn't following him with the same urgency with which he is fleeing, gives him the moment he needs to collect himself and focus.

*Crap, why did I have to up and panic like that?* Though he thought he was prepared for anything they might throw at him, he was evidently not prepared for the sight of the head of the very friend he was joking with just yesterday to be destroyed right in front of him. *Relatively speaking, I handled that much the same way anyone would.* Still, both his knees are trembling not just from nervousness but the strain of having to run at a pace he wasn't used to, and he has to press down on them with both hands to calm down.

*For now, I need to find some way to get away from him.* He quickly scans the lobby, turning in all directions. As he does this, he hears the heavy echo of footsteps coming from the corridor he just went through.

*This is bad.* Mikiya starts running again, more composed this time. He makes a break for the stairs, having nowhere else to go, but no sooner has he climbed three steps when he hears a sharp, keening sound that lasts barely a second. At almost the same time, his feet lose their purchase on the floor, somehow deprived of what strength he had forced into them and forcing him to fall on the stairs on his knees. He reaches out with his hand toward the railing, seeking to use it to raise himself up, but fails. He slips downwards, back to the first floor,

and collapses side first on to the staircase. Quickly, he looks at his legs and finds a dark red stain spreading downward in his slacks, originating from his knees. *They've been pierced by something from behind*, he observes now with a kind of detachment, as though it is another person's knees he is examining. He feels no pain. Not just yet. The adrenaline is working its magic, so the wounds feel more hot than painful.

"Easy now, young man. Can't have you breaking your neck falling on the stairs, now can we? I have plans for you. Fortunately, that spell was only enough to stop you, and not burst your knees open at the seams." Alba comes walking, arms spread wide in a sick sort of welcome.

Mikiya says nothing, only trying to crawl his way up the stairs even as the wound has his undivided attention. Despite what Alba said, the blood is pouring out of the wounds as fast as spilled drink. Slowly, though he doesn't realize it yet, Mikiya's consciousness is fighting a losing battle. "You are a conjurer, or summoner, or a worker of familiars much like your mentor, are you not? Then call your pets forth, or suffer the shame of being unworthy of the moniker of a mage." When Mikiya does nothing, Alba frowns.

"Hmph. It seems our dear Aozaki was not as good a mentor to you as I thought. But I expected nothing less from her, as she is full of such flaws. The story of how she the Ordo granted her title is one such example. The Ordo grants the titles of color to the mages they deem with the most potential. I know that 'Ao' in Japanese means 'blue,' and true to her surname, Aozaki desired this rank, this highest of honors. But the Ordo judged her unworthy of it, instead granting it to her younger sister, who was deemed her family's rightful successor, and snatched everything away from her. Aozaki entered the Collegium to best her sister in the Art, but even here, she is defeated. Ironically, she was given the title of 'Red.' But because the 'Tō' in her name means orange, I think it is even more appropriate for her! A color that seems completely unable to own up to her title of Red. It was perfect!"

Alba reaches the foot of the stairs looming above the immobile Mikiya while wearing a smile of supreme satisfaction.

"Count yourself lucky that you meet your end in the same place as your mentor. Being Aozaki's apprentice, I thought that you would make a sport of

yourself. Alas, you were nothing but a disappointment.” He takes a knee beside Mikiya, and extends a hand slowly towards his face. In contrast to Alba’s leisurely movement, Mikiya’s arm suddenly springs into action.

“Wha—” Alba’s surprise lasts for only a moment. But it is the only moment Mikiya needs to exploit. His upper body moves, bringing a hand from under him, brandishing a silver knife that he had hidden beneath his jacket. It is the silver paper opener of Tōko Aozaki, brought by Mikiya just in case, but thinking he would never need to use it. Now he closes his eyes shut and thrusts it toward Alba.

It’s the first time in his life he’s ever had any murderous intent and actually carried it out. It is a feeling foreign to him, and for that reason he closed his eyes so as not to see the entire thing directly. The solid feeling in his hands tells him that the knife has struck home against...something, certainly. For sure, he knew the red-coated man was unprepared, then cursed but was cut short. He couldn’t have dodged a strike at such close quarters.

Hoping that he hadn’t inflicted a wound too serious, Mikiya opens his eyes. His fading consciousness blurs his vision for a moment until it resolves into a coherent image...of Alba looming before him with his outstretched hand, the knife stuck quite deeply and straight in the center of that same hand’s palm. His grin is wider than ever.

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It is only a small moment of incredulity for Mikiya. But it passes like an hour.

“What a bad boy you are to do such a thing to me,” Alba spits out mockingly. “It’s only fun until someone loses an eye.” As he says this, he extends his other hand to Mikiya, this time with haste. He grabs Mikiya by the face, holds it tight, raises it slightly, then slams it down onto the steps of the stairs. The back of Mikiya’s head makes a dull sound in the impact. Losing no time, he raises Mikiya’s head again, and slams it back down again. And again. And again. Each time, repeating the same phrase.

“Fun, fun, fun, fun, fun, fun, fun, fun, fun!” Each accompanied by the same dull thud, both sounds resounding in the vastness of the lobby. Mikiya’s grip on the knife loosens as he loses consciousness. Eventually, even his breath falls lighter and more desperate. At this, Alba finally stops and stands up.

“Ah, what a pain. A pain such that would have made me cry. I would have wanted to let you live, but I’m sure you wouldn’t be able to bear the shame of it.” He extracts the bloodied knife from his hand as if brushing off a leaf, and nods to himself and his own words in approval. “Well, I do believe I’ve done what I’ve set out here to do. Though I do have a passing interest in Alaya’s little experiment, I do believe I should be getting back to Germany. The air here in Japan is not good for me, you see,” he says to the unmoving Mikiya. Alba turns away from the body, and starts walking away, heading for the corridor that leads back to the central lobby.

But before he is able to do so, he hears something he doesn’t expect. Another set of footsteps echoing from that same corridor; high-pitched falls, the sound of which is recognizable to him. He, in fact, heard them only yesterday.

“Impossible.”

But he has no time to think, and soon enough, the origin of those footsteps stands in the lobby, large suitcase in tow. Now, as before, Tōko Aozaki blocks his way.

## Chapter 16

“Spare us the hackneyed lines of ‘but you should be dead,’ Cornelius. You’re a mage. You know all about bodies. About containers. About the creation of life and the granting of sentience. Don’t disappoint me,” Tōko Aozaki says with a bitter tenderness. Alba is silent and has his eyes affixed only on her. On his hands can be seen a faint trembling.

Tōko drops her bag on the marble floor with an accompanying “That should do it.” The bag is the only thing that proves to be different. Her face, her eyes, her hair, the smug smile she wears; all the same. Only the bag has changed. Yesterday it was just a smallish briefcase, but this one is far bigger. One you’d take on a trip, and where you could conceivably hide a small child in.

“I came as fast I could,” Tōko says, “but from the looks of things, I guess I didn’t make it in time. I believe I made it clear that Kokutō isn’t my apprentice, but you just wouldn’t listen. Never taught him a thing about the Art. And in case you’re wondering, nope, I haven’t changed one iota.”

“But—but you should be dead! I snuffed the life out of you with my bare hands!” Alba shouts, seemingly oblivious to what Tōko is saying. He curls his hands into fists to stop himself from trembling. In his mind he is equal parts unbelieving, mad, and fearful, though he tries his best to hide it. Tōko is placid and continues to refuse meeting Alba’s bloodshot stare, choosing instead to retrieve a pack of cigarettes from her pocket.

Alba watches her every move from where he is. The more the figure before him continues to act like the Tōko he knows, the chill in his spine grows ever

worse. Unable to contain himself, he cries out to Tōko. “You can’t be here. It’s a mistake. Yes! Some sort of mistake! You’re lost on the way to your next life. The dead should not linger in this world. ***Begone, spectre!***”

He raises a blood-soaked hand, the same hand that Mikiya stabbed. His blood and the blood of Tōko’s pulverized head are coming together in a mix of red for red. He swings this hand in a wide arc in front of him, splattering wet blood all around. As the scattered liquid flies through the air, they combust and burst into sizeable flames in flight like gasoline. All of his remaining malice, he hurls toward Tōko in that desperate weaving of the Art.

The flames whip in arcs and try to wrap around Tōko, but in an instant, she moves her own hand, as if to pull the flames in. Sure enough, the fire is drawn to her hand, where it comes to a halt right before it. Palm open and the concentrated flame hovering above it, Tōko uses it to light the cigarette in her mouth, and by waving it away with a casual disdain, the flames are dispelled.

“Hey, Cornelius, if you don’t want dead men and women in this building then I suggest you file a complaint with this apartment’s owner. Knock the act off already, can’t you tell I’m the real deal? Pretty big difference between the dead and the living. Like cigarettes.” She takes in a satisfied puff, and frowns. “For example, I can tell that this one’s some bad stuff,” Tōko chuckles.

The casualness with which he throws away her comments finally makes Alba realize that the person before him is indeed a living thing, unchanged from the original. But that only makes him repeat the same question, not in disbelief, but due to being unable to understand. So he repeats.

“But you should be dead,” he says, a note of dejection in his voice. The words force a frown on Tōko’s face, leaving unsaid her displeasure in the trite line, allowing her amber eyes to make her point.

“Technically, Cornelius, I did die. Body virtually destroyed, soul severed from the flesh, the whole shebang.”

“Then explain your being here!”

She sighs. “I thought that would have been obvious. I’m the replacement, fresh out of the package,” she says, no absurdity finding its way into her voice. The statement leaves the red-coated mage blank, mouth half open.

“What do you mean a ‘replacement?’ Are you a puppet when you can be revived so easily? Or maybe—” Alba starts to think of other possibilities, other well-kept lore and arcana of the Art.

The puppets that mages create can never match with the human façade. It can move as a man would, but it will expose itself soon enough, through speech, or action, or appearance; something that seems off or wrong in its creation, *something* that exposes its true nature. That, and the parts that make it tick are not truly alive, only clever mechanisms animated by the Art. A loss of limb—exposing blood and muscle sinew—will reveal it.

*The Art cannot create an automaton that contains the spark of humanity.* An old mage saying from the Middle Ages, passed down to become common knowledge. Eventually it became almost a rule. Yet despite this, the woman standing in front of Alba is certainly human. Certainly some kind of replica, but completely lacking the distinctive tell that gives away the fakery of all puppets. Which, to Alba, can only mean that this woman is the real Tōko Aozaki.

“Now I see it! Then the one I killed is surely the fake!”

“Just keep lying to yourself, Cornelius. That also means that the mage that bested you yesterday was nothing more than a pale imitation of me, correct?”

“Hmph. Fine, then that was the real thing. But here we have a paradox. You’re saying both are real. How do you explain this inconsistency away?!” Alba cries out to Tōko. But from the look on his face after he says it, it seems he solved the answer by himself. He shakes his head rapidly, still doubting, still thinking it impossible. But how else can he explain it? Can it be possible? “Aozaki, don’t tell me you’re—”

“Ding ding. Both the one you fought yesterday, and the me standing before you today, are fakes. I don’t even know the point that the real became the fake. I don’t even know if it matters anymore.” The mage in the orange trench coat dons a cruel grin.

“Then what are you? Not an original? Was there even an original? But you call yourself Tōko Aozaki, don’t you? With a soul to work the Art, and granted sentience! But all the puppets granted fleeting sentience up to this point have been unable to grasp the existential dilemma of their artificial nature, and end up

terminating themselves. How do you break the rules? How do you continue to function?!"

"Everything before me was but second rate sentience, I'd say. I really don't see the need for how scared you are right now, Cornelius. You call me fake, yet there's only one Tōko Aozaki. As a parting gift, I'll even tell you how that came to be. Maybe it'll be a good learning experience." Losing a bit of her calm façade, she finally meets Alba's eye to eye.

"Listen, Cornelius. The me you're seeing right now is something I kept in my sanctum. It activated itself once you killed Tōko Aozaki. Only been an hour since. I am a mage that traffics in pawns and puppets, so I experiment on them as well. In one of these experiments, I crafted my foremost creation: a perfect puppet imitation of me. No more, and no less than myself. I looked on it, and allowed my thoughts to wander. I thought that having created such a thing, maybe there is no longer any need for me."

As the puppeteer relates the story to her like a layperson to a priest, Alba gulps. He can't believe his ears. Heresy to the laws of the Ordo Magi, pure and simple. Why would she not be happy that she achieved this, instead of throwing away her existence?

"Ridiculous," Alba spits out. "In the end, what you created couldn't be anything more than an automaton. Assuming you could even make such a thing as you described in the first place. And if you have indeed performed it, then why does it not...why do you not seek ascension? Why do you not aim higher? Mages are never satisfied by the status quo. We seek, manipulate, create, and destroy only for the final step in that ladder."

"Hey, you're looking at the state of the art of the Art here, and even when I was gone, it still went on doing the same thing I did. How does that give any puppeteer hope for ascension?"

"But it's all just supposed to be theory! I wouldn't allow myself to be cast aside for something new, yet similar to me. Even if it was an achievement that would make my name ring throughout the history of the Art, it is not enough. I must be there to observe it, or else there is no meaning!" Alba screams incoherently as he wraps his arms around himself as if it would protect him from

something he didn't quite yet know. Anyone can discern the difference now between the two mages; between the one who preoccupied himself on the matters of revenge, and the mage that threw herself away for the path of gnosis. But Alba refuses to acknowledge it.

"Call it a difference of opinion and philosophy, Alba. Still, no need to blame yourself. To tell you the truth, I'm sort of jealous of you, actually. I don't know when I became the way I am. I don't even know which of me was real anymore. I just woke up when the previous me died. The soul remembers everything, and it's all there in my head, everything I know. Determinism and entropy kinda says that I take the same action as my predecessor would. After all this, maybe I'll make another puppet to convince myself that I'm the real thing. The real thing might be the one you killed. It might already be dead. But it's all the same thing, isn't it? No way to distinguish us. It's a quantum superposition like that cat in the box problem. No one's ever gonna know. But I think what's important right now for you and me is the fact that I'm here, and that for now, for all intents and purposes, I'm Tōko Aozaki, and if it brings you any measure of comfort, you can think of the one you killed as the fake. We clear? Good! Now we can get down to real business."

She reaches down for the bag she'd placed on the floor. Alba stares at her opponent, more terrified of her revelation than if she had woven a dozen curses at him. "That's right," he says in a low voice. "*That's* why Alaya kept you alive. As long as you remained alive, the next iteration of you wouldn't trigger and come alive."

Tōko keeps her silence now, only maintaining her harsh glance at the red-coated mage. Alba had long since stopped trying to hold back his trembling. For him, the cold grows stronger as he looks into Tōko's sterile eyes. He sees no warmth in that amber color, only an efficient intent to kill buried inside them. He never knew Tōko to look like the way she did now. Not even in their time in the Collegium did she show anything as bloodthirsty as she is at this moment.

And Alba comes to the idea that, for him, the Tōko he had known until now was the only real one. Not this cold, standing figure that hides so many secrets even from herself. No, not this side of her that is the ruthless mage that is peer to none. And as he entertains such thoughts, he finds what reason for revenge he

holds start to become less significant, less pressing. For he didn't know what monster he had aligned himself against, or if he really hated it. Because, at the very least, the Tōko Aozaki *he* knew was very much different.

"Are you real?" he whispers one last time like a confession. Tōko snickers.

"Now what meaning does that question have on something like me?" she hisses, her face a portrait of sweetly ringing malice.

Tōko brings the cigarette held between her fingers back to her mouth. "Now, let's return to our more pressing problems," she says as she puffs out gray smoke from her mouth. "You hurt my friend pretty badly with your teasing. Probably didn't even notice the hour go by."

Alba, for his part, does indeed remember Tōko saying that it took her an hour to get here. He looks at the boy collapsed at the foot of the stairs. The wounds in his knees remain unchanged. But mysteriously, the wounds in his head and the blood that those wounds are supposed to have spawned are gone.

"What—what manner of sorcery have you done, Aozaki?" Alba asks feebly. All the bluster of his earlier displays have left him, and whatever will he had left to attack Tōko is gone in the face of her greater proficiency.

"Tsk tsk. We mages shouldn't use that word so lightly. Remember: this is the third time I've been in this lobby. The first time I was here, I placed my own spell. On a delayed trigger, if you will. A little trick I placed in advance that I could play in tonight's party. Think back to the time of your surprise when our boy Kokutō here lunged at you with the knife."

"That was the trick?" Alba moans in regret, remembering that exact time. There is a void in his memory, something missing that connects what happened before and after the boy's attack on him. A momentary lapse? Some illusion the puppet master had set up beforehand that manipulated his perception? He laughs in futility.

"So I was playing right into your hands from the very start, you witch. You must have enjoyed yourself immensely, Aozaki. Though I am loathe to admit it, I must have seemed quite the fool."

“Oh, don’t blame yourself overmuch. After all, I never thought I’d end up dying. Rest easy, though. I didn’t come here again to pay back that particular act, but for something else. That you and Kokutō happened to be here is a mere convenience.” Tōko gives a slight nudge to the bag placed beside her feet and makes it fall to the ground. Or roll over, more like. Its shape is approximately that of a cube, and its size intimidatingly large.

“If you are not here for revenge, then what is your purpose?” Alba asks. “To stop Alaya’s mad attempts at experimenting with the Art, no doubt.” “Not by a long shot. Why should I when that thing takes care of itself? No, Alba. My business is with you alone.”

As though he’d arrived at the same conclusion, Alba nods. But, he wonders, why him if Tōko says she bears him no ill will, or any intent to interfere in Alaya’s experiments? Why does she look so tensed and prepared on spilling blood? “Why? I’ve done nothing else to you,” he says in protest.

“Nothing much more than a trifle. I mean, I’ve pretty much gotten over your irrational hatred of me. To tell you the truth, I rather preferred it that way ever since our time in the Collegium together. It was proof that I was always better.”

“Then why?!”

“Still don’t remember? It’s a very simple reason: you called me by a moniker far too old to be funny.” The sound of Tōko’s suitcase opening rings out in the lobby, and within it Alba can only see a dark mass which somehow remains untouched by all the light. And within that there are two things—

“Come now, recall those words in the Collegium,” Tōko declares. “Recall the name ‘Wild Red.’ Recall how I swore to destroy anyone who said it. And how I did.”

—two lights—or two eyes.

And upon seeing it, Alba finally understands. He chastises himself belatedly for not realizing it sooner. This is a box for sealing magical familiars inside, similar to what Tōko used before, only larger. And the creature in it now, whatever it is, emerges from the seemingly infinite depths of the box with baffling speed to capture Cornelius Alba with thorn-lined tendrils. He feels a thousand tiny mouths chewing and consuming him in small portions as he is

dragged into the box, being eaten alive. When only his head and neck remain visible, Alba and the puppetmaster's eyes meet for the last time before he is completely consumed. Her eyes are eyes of laughter. And he finally realizes his foolishness in ever thinking that he could rival such a monster. He remembers Alaya's last words to him. Perhaps he should have seen this coming after all. The last thoughts in the mind of a mage slowly being eaten.

## Chapter 17

Tomoe Enjō leans on the cold walls of the confined, claustrophobic elevator as it slowly moves upward. He stares blankly into space even though his breath becomes more ragged every moment. Ever since he cauterized the stump of his arm to stop the bleeding, his arm nerves haven't stopped sending signals of pain. Knowing that his mind and body are both in the worst possible conditions, he is unable to think straight, his mind hazy and blank. It takes him serious concentration to even keep his breathing at a manageable level.

He's only ridden this elevator one other time, but even now Tomoe can feel it moving slowly, taking its time climbing the chamber, and making him grow impatient. Carelessly, Tomoe drops the sword. The thud it makes hitting the floor wakes him back to concentration. It's heavier than he expected, and only an hour or so of having it slung across his shoulder has already made his arm numb. Lacking a second arm, he can't even draw it from its scabbard, let alone wield it effectively. So he takes out the knife in his pocket and grips it tight, thinking it a better weapon for his situation now.

Finally, the elevator stops. It's reached the tenth floor. When the door slides open, Tomoe steps outside and into the central lobby. Immediately in front of him is the corridor to the east building, and on the other side of the elevator chamber is the corridor to the west building, unseen from here. Tomoe starts walking towards the west building, where the lights are off and the real corpses are left in their places. He walks around the elevator chamber, sees and walks through the corridor, and comes out in the hallway that describes the circumference of the Ōgawa Apartments. In a few more minutes, Tomoe knows,

it will soon be eleven o' clock in the evening.

Here in the hallway, the view of the outside world is quiet and lonely. All the apartments and condos surrounding this particular one all look about the same. Below, sporadic spots of garden greenery mixes with the dull dark grey of the asphalt. It makes the entire scene look less like an assemblage of high-rises and more like a cemetery and its gravestones writ large.

Though his attention is facing the night scenery outside, he is certain he feels the presence of a person somewhere nearby. So with deep breath, a bout of concentration, and a grip on the knife, he slowly turns toward the direction of the elliptical hallway, unlighted save for the faint blue glow of moonlight. There, separated from him by a distance of two rooms, stands a figure wearing a black greatcoat. Though the light makes it difficult to make out, the person's height and silhouette leave little room for doubt. A lifetime of anguish has chipped away at the face. Standing here now is the mage, Sōren Alaya.

The moment Tomoe confronts Alaya, he freezes. For a moment, his breathing normalizes, his pain disappears, his consciousness is stilled, and all becomes silent. He stands there, unable to do anything. But he is glad for this because it is a moment of respite where he can redouble his purpose.

“Alaya!” Though he cannot do anything, and his freedom of movement is stripped away and limited, Tomoe speaks with confidence, invoking his opponent’s name as a sort of proof of equality. Trepidation will not be his quality this time. Alaya’s features seem to darken at this brazen act.

“Why have you returned?” the mage asks in his heavy set voice. Tomoe denies him an answer and only looks straight at him and his eyes that don’t seem to take in any light. It is all he can do not to look away. “You have no place here. Your replacement has been readied, and your return was not a necessity.”

*Why did I return? Tomoe thinks. Well, the first time was because Ryōgi brought me along for the ride. But now it’s—*

“To save Shiki Ryōgi, is it?” Alaya asks mockingly. “Fool. Do not think your heart is a thing that belongs to you. If you have not realized it yet, you are a mere puppet. Do you find yourself unable to live, separated from this spiral?”

“Wh—”

“It is true that you escaped this spiral of an existence. The Tomoe who died, died due to the actions of his family. But that was not for you. You thought you escaped. You despaired. You even contemplated the thought of suicide, and you would have done so, left alone as you were. But you had a role to play in this stage as well. A role you were designed for. Tell me, do you know it?”

Tomoe wants to scream and cast off Alaya’s lies, but cannot seem to summon the strength to do so. Instead, he stands there, unmoving. The mage’s face is unchanged, the eyes still sneering and ridiculing his inaction as he continues.

“It was the final throw of the coin for me. And I succeeded, as you fulfilled your role better than my wildest expectations. Without knowing me, you brought Shiki Ryōgi here to her final act. Though I had the lowest expectations for you, you defied them. And though I reward you by removing the leash, it seems you must still come back. Make no mistake; you have no agency that I do not ultimately shape. You did not crave Shiki Ryōgi out of your own will. I only appended one thing to your existence after your first escape: to draw in Shiki Ryōgi and bring her in clandestinely.”

Unable to form a coherent argument against Alaya’s words, Tomoe finds it difficult to remain standing. Because after all, he knows inside that it is true. How can someone like Tomoe, who had never truly loved a stranger before, suddenly find himself in love with Ryōgi? Ever since he first met her, he had already felt some inexplicable impulse driving him, telling him to observe her, and take interest in her.

“So you understand now, do you?” Alaya says. “You gave a reason for Shiki Ryōgi to come here, but the decisions were never yours. You are but a mere congregation of the memories of a single day in this pocket reality. Nothing before, and nothing after; your so-called will an illusion maintained by delusions. There is no other place for your simple life. For you are powerless, and as such, unlike the fantasies you entertain in your heart of hearts, you cannot hope to stop me.” Now, as before, the mage’s words are charged with the taint of magic.

The facts of his artificial origins, the one day of life lived over hundreds of days, and the delusion of the past he relied on and a future that he could hope for all come crashing into Tomoe’s mind. His feelings toward Shiki, and toward his dead family, his humanity: all an artifice. Only the exits and entrances of the one

day drama he had lived repetitively remains in a weak emanation. And even that, Tomoe wonders—even that cannot be trusted.

“In the end, you are not even worth my attention in watching you expire pathetically. Disappear, and never be seen again,” Alaya says in a deep, commanding voice. He seems to lose interest in Tomoe after he said what he felt must be said, averting his eyes from the boy. But against the revelations that Alaya attacks him with, Tomoe offers only an unprecedented smile.

“The fuck you blabbing about? That shit isn’t as important as you think it is to me,” Tomoe says, but if it dealt any crack on the mage’s demeanor, he does not make it visible. “Being here in front of you now, I get it. I didn’t want to admit I was weak like you, but now I know I gotta face it. ‘Sides, real or fake, doesn’t matter in the end. What matters is what comes after it. ‘Least I know that I’m Tomoe Enjō. Even if I got no past, what matters is that I think I do. And for me, it gives me all that I need.” He chews with an empty mouth, but finds it helpful to his concentration. “I really liked Ryōgi. Fuck the reason. The ride was fun while it lasted, even though I couldn’t give her anything. And if you say you’re the reason for the whole thing, then I gotta be a gentleman and thank you, don’t I?”

Tomoe clicks his tongue, remembering what he can of Shiki Ryōgi. It seems like a different life now. At least every time he remembers her, the clicking of the gears and cogs that placed him in the circumstance of his life seem to fade away. *That Mikiya guy was right*, Tomoe thinks. *It’s more important to think of myself sometimes*. He needed to come here. Shiki is only part of the reason. He had to know all that had been revealed to him tonight. Own up to the cost. Maybe find his own redemption in what little he can do. *But I still gotta do it.*

*Sorry about this, Ryōgi. Looks like I’m not dying for you after all. I’m putting my life on the line for my own self. In his mind, the apology is a whisper, and with just that, the thought of Shiki Ryōgi departs from his mind.*

“Call me a fake all you want, Alaya,” Tomoe declares. Alaya’s expression finally changes, though subtly, with the slight quiver of his brow.

“You would go against your nature? That way lies foolishness and hubris. It will never change the truth of you,” he replies with disdain.

“Maybe. But at least my soul is true,” Tomoe says with a quiet murmur, carried on the wind and echoing out through the night.

“The time for talk is long past.”

Tomoe nods slowly and determinedly, secretly agreeing. The mage raises his hand in his familiar gesture, like a signal for his enemy’s imminent demise. As soon as Tomoe sees this, he holds back the chattering in his teeth. He knows he will be killed. But at the very least, he can pay him back a few for the trouble. This isn’t suicide to him. This is for the sake of his parents, and for the sake of the dead and dying in this spiral of a false world, and for his own sake as well. Tomoe doesn’t want to die. But there are some things worth dying for. *Time to run. To run and face the truth. Run with the same joy in my memory. Run like the hands on a clock, or the changing seasons. Run so that I don’t end up in the same place every time. Whether it’s a dream that doesn’t truly exist, it drives a determination that I know is real.*

“Alaya, I will kill you.” Gripping the knife tight, Tomoe Enjō breaks into a sprint.

Tomoe Enjō aims to hit only one target: Sōren Alaya’s heart. He’d seen Shiki strike the same place with a determined strike, and he thinks that repeating it might proffer the mage’s death. And so, aiming at this, Tomoe runs, attempting to close the same six meter distance that Shiki once closed in a mere two or three seconds. He kicks off the floor with an explosion of strength, remembering the sprints he repeated over and over in the track in school. He will make this his best time yet.

In the space around Alaya, a circular perimeter appears much like the one he deployed in his fight with Shiki. However, unlike the threefold circular ward that he used with Shiki, he only uses one, perhaps to mock Tomoe. This particular one only spreads out a meter away from the mage. Tomoe knows no way to avoid it, and so he steps right into it. With an arrested jerk, his body halts in place. The power that only moments ago flowed through Tomoe’s legs is gone in one disorienting instant. He is immobile, unable to do anything.

Frowning, Alaya takes one sluggish pace forward, impressing upon Tomoe the

gravity of the situation. His outstretched hand slowly takes hold of Tomoe's head. *No good huh*, thinks Tomoe as he closes his eyes. But he refuses to back down.

"My family didn't deserve to die like they did," Tomoe struggles to say. "They weren't so bad that they deserved to be killed!" he shouts. He fights the invisible chains that bind him as hard as he can, not caring even if his legs might be snapped in two, as long as it doesn't end like this. *I'm not worthless.*

"I existed! I've lived!" Tomoe cries as he pours his last burst of effort into escaping. He hears a snapping sound, then a sharp tear, and then the flash of pain of a leg splitting open. He starts to fall forward, but turns that momentum into his last attack. Passing under Alaya's arm, he lets his hand that holds the knife fly to the mage's defenseless chest, the steel glinting and seemingly leaving a cold, silver trail in the air. And it hits its mark. But that is the only thing that happens.

"You fool," Alaya says with a voice tinged with regret. He draws back his hand to seize Tomoe's head once again, unfazed by the strike at his chest. This time, his hold is solid, almost crushing.

"You are not Shiki Ryōgi, nor do you have her Eyes. You do not realize that the knowing of death is not enough, for there is value too in the seeing. You cannot hope to actualize my entropy without seeing it." Now the mage's muscular arm begins to crush the head which it holds. Tomoe's hand that wielded the knife is now forced to withdraw it from the mage's chest, slipping out easily and dropping to the floor in a clatter, the hand that only seconds ago gripped it tightly now losing its strength.

"You never knew the reason you were chosen," Alaya whispers sternly. Tomoe does not honor him with an acknowledgement. The hand seems to rob him of his last will to live. "In your last moments, you have earned this knowledge, so listen well. All things have an impetus that drives and shapes their very existence. A primal impulse contained and cycled in the Akashic Record we mages call an 'origin.' I knew you would murder your mother, and fall into despair because your origin is known to me."

Again, Tomoe does not answer. Alaya holds Tomoe's body up high by the head, and with a voice far too chilling, speaks.

“Know this: you were never capable of anything. For your origin was ‘worthlessness.’”

In the flash of a moment, some arcane power, like a command, passes through Alaya’s hands. The power enters the body of Tomoe Enjō, and he begins to fade from existence completely, disintegrating into the air into nothingness.

After the destruction Tomoe Enjō, the mage Sōren Alaya stands stock still in the tenth floor hallway. He knows the time is close at hand. He has prepared the body he will use, and his soul is ready to be relocated, and he will finally leave this inferior flesh. Unlike the puppet master he once knew, his soul will not move to something similar to his previous form. He has no need of one, for he has never known death. He has known rot and decay, but his soul presses him forward to some grand goal, and so he survives. And in the end, he stands alone. This body will either be his medium for ascension, or death; for there is no other. Due to this, his extreme attention to caution can perhaps be forgiven.

Not much longer now until he leaves this false material world, his soul sublimated to the vessel of the girl connected to the spiral of origin, from where he can command reality itself. As above, so below. The process has already started. But before this happens, there is one matter left to settle.

“So you have fallen, Alba,” Alaya mutters in a lifeless voice. He closes his eyes. At first he is in the unlit hallway, but with a single thought, he feels himself fall through the floor as if diving through a deep sea, and seems to descend into slumber.

While Alaya’s body remains in the tenth floor, his consciousness travels downward. Without shape or form, he observes the state of affairs in the lobby on the first floor’s east wing. Present there is the mage Tōko Aozaki, as well as the boy called Mikiya Kokutō. Tōko is nursing the fallen boy’s wounds, but it seems Cornelius Alba cannot be found. It is just as he expected. He prepares to return his consciousness to his body, but something holds him back.

“Where are you going, Alaya? Scrying is in poor taste,” Tōko says with a click of her tongue. Though formless, Tōko looks over her shoulder as though he sees

Alaya. She is at the foot of the staircase, while he is observing from the top. As before, they find themselves confronting each other.

*Hmph. So you did indeed have a second puppet as I thought. And through it you have disposed of Alba. The heart I plundered from you was real, I know it to be. Does this mean you are a mere fake?*

Alaya's voice echoes throughout the lobby. But there is no sound. It is a reverberating voice only Tōko can hear. Upon hearing Alaya's question, Tōko sighs.

"First Alba, then you. Both of you sure like fussing over the little details. Always asking 'what's the difference between then and now,' and never anything productive. I wonder how long you plan to take the questions this time."

*The propensity of your mouth to utter irritations seems unchanged, at the very least. Then will you duel with me once more?*

"No, thanks. I've got no chance of winning in this apartment building," speaking frankly, Tōko turns her attention away from the mage's presence, deciding that nursing the unconscious boy is more important than maintaining her conversation with Alaya. She produces a bandage from beneath her brown trench coat and begins to dress the wound in the boy's knees.

*Is your decision true? The familiar you contain within that box is capable of defeating me.*

"I humbly decline. If I just cut this familiar loose, it might well consume the entire building. The Ordo Magi would definitely notice, and they wouldn't let that slide. After all the trouble I went through occulting myself here, I wouldn't want all of that to go to waste." Tōko doesn't look over her shoulder when she answers him. "I lost when I died. I accept that. Whether you acquire Shiki's body and cast of your own or not, I don't care. If there were someone able to stop you, it wouldn't be me."

*Do you still rely hopelessly on the Deterrent this late in the game? I have told you before that it will not function.*

Tōko shakes her head, in pity more so than repudiation. "Maybe so. Maybe

you've actually won this time. I don't know what you'll do when you reach the spiral of origin. They told us that the mages who reached the realms above remained, never to return to the material world below, sloughing off their memory of it like dry skin. But you fancy yourself different, don't you? You'd reshape reality, cast your shadow here on this side. As above, so below. You think you hate humanity so much that you want to save them. If that were true, you'd will yourself from existence after your ascension. But you don't really hate humanity, Alaya. You only love the notion of the Platonic human you think you harbor within you. It's why you can't forgive the world of suffering you see. It's hilarious, too, how you think you want to save them. But you only want to save your delusional self."

Alaya does not immediately respond. At this point, any common cause they thought they shared, and what Alaya thought he could appeal to, is now well and truly broken. When he speaks, he speaks in a tone of grief.

*Then there is little else to speak about. For I see only one way to salvation. Farewell, Aozaki. I cannot leave any proof of my arrival at the spiral of origin. Only content yourself with the knowledge that you were the one that endeavored to stop me, and find meaning in that.*

The mage's consciousness starts to fade from the lobby and the senses of Tōko Aozaki. Back still turned, she suddenly remembers a certain doubt. "Wait, Alaya. I have one last matter to ask. You made this facsimile of the Taijitu to contain the *Taijitu*, didn't you?"

*Of course. I made this pocket reality primarily to keep Shiki Ryōgi from escaping. Everything else is an addendum to that objective.*

Though Alaya replies with an air of composure, Tōko starts to snicker, initially trying her hardest to hold it back. Unable to calm herself, the female mage begins to laugh loudly, and with mockery and humor, unrestrained and even somewhat disconcerting.

"Yeah, this building is just one big pile of sorcery, isn't it? A closed realm to hide Shiki and your experiment from the Ordo, from me, from the consensus. A prison! A prison to keep the Deterrent from acting. Up until that point, your theory is watertight, Alaya. But what a pity! You have committed your gravest

mistake yet.”

Alaya is at a loss at grasping the meaning of Tōko’s words. I made no mistake. His voice is without hesitation, a self-affirmation. Tōko tries to answer as she holds back bouts of laughter.

“Yes. True. Perfect weaving, for any mage’s spell. But think back, Alaya. What if your assumption itself was wrong? You isolated Shiki not in a room in this building, but within the building itself, didn’t you? A spell bordering on sorcery that cuts her off from regular space, trapping her in a lemniscate space, rendering anyone incapable of escaping. A prison that won’t break no matter which weapon one uses. It’s a finely woven pattern for one versed in the arcanum of the wards such as you. You think you have trapped her, and your guard slackens. But you see, Alaya, it is no proof against her. We mages might be an abhorrence of reality, a paradox on the pattern of the world, but Shiki is a reaper for beings as uncommon as us. Even now, she works against you!”

Her words unsettle the observing mage, and he feels his mind seem to stop. Certainly, Shiki’s talent lies not only in the killing of physical things. The many weapons that humanity has created are tools enough for such purpose. It is her ability to bring entropy upon things that don’t even know the concept of “life” as we know it, concepts and thoughts without form, bringing the ultimate void to bear.

*The one that brings entropy to all things.* That is her ability. She is contained in an infinite span of nothingness. Without form, Alaya thought the space would keep her safe from anything that would extract her physically. But the Arcane Eyes that Shiki Ryōgi holds grants her power over that formlessness as well. And so, Alaya realizes too late.

“Now is your blunder obvious, Alaya? It might actually have been better for you to trap Shiki in a concrete cell. Matter with form takes its toll harder on her when she weaves entropy, and is the reason she uses a weapon. Though I doubt even a material prison would have kept her for long. But your flimsy cage is not so solid. You treated her as you would a mage, but now your oversight is costing you, as she now tears it apart tooth and nail slowly but with the ease of shredding meat. And soon, you will be witness to her escape!” With her final sentence, Tōko finally looks back over her shoulder at Alaya. Before he can comprehend

what her eyes told him, his consciousness fades and is fished back into the body that contains it.

As Alaya is pulled back into his body, he senses in it the rumblings of an irregularity. There is coldness in it that he has never before felt, and his fingertips grow numb from it. The sweat on his forehead mocks the chill running through his body, even as his insides seem to completely stop, shouting to him of some impending peril.

*It has been severed*, he thinks in protestation, unbelieving. But he is now face to face with the truth of the matter. For he senses the place, somewhere in this building, where something has just torn its way free. It is the closed space he'd constructed, now destroyed in a single unwavering stroke.

Though Alaya's will controls his body, it also has sympathetic correspondence with the almost living properties of the building. The framework his flesh; the wiring his nerves; the pipes his veins and arteries. And the pain of it being cut reflects and finds its way back to roost in its owner, a pain so great that even Alaya cannot ignore it, the proof of it lying in the loss of concentration that forced him to close his scrying spell on the first floor lobby and return to his body, as if compelled by some forceful arm.

“What is happening?” he murmurs as he wipes the sweat off his brow with an arm. Chills trickle down his spine, little spiders crawling up and down with their tiny legs. It is the herald of a nauseating emotion that he has not felt in many, many years. “Be still, Sōren Alaya,” he scolds to himself for his moment of weakness.

But the phenomenon he feels doesn't stop. The arcane power that only moments ago he channeled through every fabric of his body seems to grow dim, and he cannot bring his fingertips to change the threads of reality's weaving, as mages do.

He feels death given form draw closer and closer.

Unexpectedly, a deep rumbling sound can be heard. It comes from beyond the hallway Alaya stands in now, echoing from the lobby. It is the distinct and familiar sound of the elevator in operation, bringing something up towards the

tenth floor. It is not long before the rumbling noise stops, and silence returns, only to be broken again by the sound of the elevator door opening. Now a soft, dry noise, repeating. Footfalls from shoes resounding from the marble floor, their metronomic click growing louder, coming closer.

Wasting no time, Alaya directs himself back to the lobby. And then, though finding it hard to believe, he sees who it is that comes. She appears before him, the light of the lobby behind her forcing the figure into a silhouette, but it is easy enough to see the white kimono, and the accompanying leather jacket that clearly does not match it. It is easy enough to see the raven hair, looking wet and unkempt as if its owner had just emerged from a long slumber in a lake. And the normally black eyes of the void, now burning with an Arcane blue. In one hand she holds the hilt of the sword being drawn slowly, lovingly from its scabbard in her other hand. Even in the oppressive dark of night, the blade glints. Sword drawn, she swings it lazily across her to rest at her side as she walks forward, gliding ethereally like a soldier in a bloody battlefield.

Bringing the tranquility that heralds death in her presence, Shiki Ryōgi has returned.

## Chapter 18

Shiki stops walking just outside the entrance to the corridor. Sword pointed downward at the floor, she sees the black-coated mage Sōren Alaya from afar, separated from each other by a distance of about ten meters. “I do not understand. How did you destroy my ward, Shiki Ryōgi?” Alaya says, his face grimacing in pain. It is the question that he has already repeated many times in his mind. And though he suspects knows the answer, he still asks it so that the gravity of it becomes more real.

The girl before him now is the same girl that only last night suffered broken ribs and lost her consciousness at his own hands. In the closed space that lay between the walls of the building, she awoke, breaking the barriers with the arms she used to weave her own variety of sorcery.

What is “ ” is antonymic to infinity. The concept of infinity is twinned with the concept of a finite existence. It is this finite existence, this end of all things that Shiki Ryōgi observes with her Arcane Eyes, and the same end that she cuts to make entropy act quickly, almost immediately. The prison she was contained in was made to be infinite, an inconceivable non-Euclidean space. But there is no true infinity. Only ends, driven by processes both mechanical and mystical. The only denial of the end that exists is the true nothingness of “ ”. To this girl, the space was nothing more than a room with its door unbarred and unguarded. It shames Alaya to admit it as such.

“Someone must have made you aware of it,” he protests. “The injury I inflicted was far too severe for it to have healed already. Why does that body move? Why did you awake despite your wounds? Why did you not stay in slumber for only a

precious few minutes more?” Alaya’s voice is rough, the only sign he has yet given of any anger he can present. The barrier never mattered, he thinks, but had she only kept her peace for a few more minutes, all would have been settled.

*Did she come back to life by herself, or did someone assist her? The question rings again and again in Alaya’s mind. Did someone wake her, make her aware she was imprisoned, and told her the secret to setting herself free? The damnable Art of Tōko Aozaki? No, she’d have had no time, having to duel me in the first time, and Alba in the second.* His face shows him in deep thought, running over the possibilities. He looks at the palm of his hand, the same hand that wiped Tomoe Enjō off completely only minutes ago. Perhaps the most decisive minutes he ever gave.

“It was Tomoe Enjō, was it not?” Alaya guesses, spitting out the name like a powerful curse.

Shiki only shakes her head in disagreement. “Nah, Enjō didn’t have a thing to do with waking me up. No one did. Woke up by my own self. Enjō didn’t even need to come here,” she says quietly. The wind blowing from the open hallway behind Alaya makes his greatcoat ruffle, and Shiki’s hair sway. “But to give him some credit, he’s the reason you failed.”

When Shiki says this, Alaya’s dark eyes narrow in curiosity as he ponders on what she said. Assuming something would be able to stop him, it would have been Shiki or Tōko Aozaki. Not the actor being pulled along on its strings.

“Impossible,” Alaya declares. “He could not do anything. He played his part well as a puppet, to bring you here.”

“True, he may have never had any real chance. But can you let go on the whole ‘he was always a puppet’ thing? You’re like the biggest guy in denial if you just keep saying it.”

Alaya cannot reply, for he knows it is true. When Tomoe Enjō escaped from the cycle he had set, Alaya thought that he could be used. He integrated him into his plan, adjusting it to allow for what he would do. But his escape itself was never part of the original plan. Wouldn’t that agency go against what Alaya had been saying all along? And it had slipped past him, even allowed him to affect the plan that he had long drawn up.

“You saw that little chink in your plan and decided to use it,” Shiki says. “But that one little mistake put a lotta holes in it. I mean, he’s the one that brought me here, wasn’t he? And guess who’s wrecking your party now? Just him escaping was already plenty significant.” She advances one step forward, sluggishly, almost drunkenly, and it throws the black-coated mage off enough for him to hesitate readying his arm as he usually would.

Alaya senses something wrong, something different about her. He does not know where she learned the knowledge of Tomoe Enjō’s destruction, and can only guess. The emotion emanating from her is...hate? *A trifling difference*, Alaya considers. *Mere change in her thoughts does not bridge the gap between our ability*. And yet, Alaya cannot help but see her as an entirely different being.

Shiki continues her ponderous advance. She doesn’t even look like she is ready to fight. She speaks again.

“Honestly, I don’t give a damn about you. But you gave me a hard time a few days ago, and I’m thinking maybe it’s time to pay you back. And so you’ll die here, tonight.” Her gaze is sleepy, her eyes less sharp. “But you know what? This is the first time that I’m not really excited about killing someone. Even though I know this round’s gonna go down to the wire, I can’t even laugh.”

The sword in Shiki’s hand clicks as her previously lax grip on it suddenly changes into a more firm, more secure purchase on the grip. Advancing slowly, she maintains her forward gaze as the sword rests beside her, hilt at waist level and pointing downwards. This finally makes the mage raise his hand, deploying the three circular lines that traditionally surround him in a perimeter.

“Very well. If this is what you desire,” Alaya says as he readies himself. “Killing you will only delay me shortly in the grand scheme of things. I should never have hoped to capture you alive from the very beginning. I will find a way to revive you, and transfer my soul. Though this body may expire, it is a small price to pay to reach the spiral of origin.”

Shiki doesn’t answer, but instead stops her advance when she sees the circular perimeter. The distance between them has closed somewhat. The outermost circle in Alaya’s threefold perimeter extends a four meter radius from him. Shiki stops two meters beyond the perimeter. Briefly, the mage can sense Shiki’s thirst

for blood shift from winter cold to summer heat, feels it wrap around the corridor and make his hair stand on end. But even sensing this intimidating change in her, even knowing the age, quality, and pedigree of the sword she holds in her hand, he is confident in Shiki's defeat. Her swordplay will not avail her today.

But Shiki senses something different. If the mage no longer thought that letting her live would be an option, he would not have allowed Shiki to close the distance the way she did. No, he would have killed her from afar outright. Alaya still holds out hope that he can still take her alive, and it is that little detail, Shiki thinks, that gives her the advantage.

Halted just outside the wards that Alaya deployed, Shiki readies herself. Her second hand grips the hilt of the sword. Her back lowers slightly, and her center of mass along with it, arching herself in a stance ready to spring. All traces of the languor that possessed her previously is now well and truly gone. She brings the sword front and center, pointing it angled with the tip leveled at her enemy's throat. The most basic stance of any discipline of swordplay.

Facing the mage, she closes her eyes and nods in understanding. "Now I know," she says softly. "I don't really want to kill you. It's just that I can't stand the thought of you existing." Her last thoughts for Tomoe's killer. The scent of murder is high in the air, and both Alaya and Shiki smell it, letting it pass over their entirety in one sweet instant. In the next, the invisible signal for battle is given, and the duel begins.

A flash, then Shiki's eyes open.

Alaya channels his mana into his outstretched hand, his motivating force in this fight not the confidence which infused him in previous conflicts, but instead the rare, almost foreign emotion that gripped him since he saw Shiki walking the lobby: the emotion of dread. Which is why he feels he must kill her here, now.

"**SHUKU!**" he roars angrily, clenching his hand into a fist, defining a space around Shiki that he would crush. The lag between the lorica and the weaving of the spell is so small as to be nonexistent, and one casting of it should be enough to dispose of the girl.

But Shiki is fast, anticipating his spell. In a flash the sword is raised high above her head, the speed blindingly fast. With the swiftness with which she raised her

sword, she lets it fly downward in a vicious slash. The spell manifests only for a moment, but Shiki kills it, just as surely as the ringing sound of her blade cutting air seems to cancel out Alaya's booming voice.

The mage attempts to repeat the spell. He need only open his palm again, and then close it. But it is too slow for him to react properly. He hasn't even spoken, hasn't even entered the spell's weaving in his mind, when Shiki displaces from her position. She shifts the sword to her side at waist level—a side stance that allows for wide swings—and sprints to her target. Before the fight, Alaya considered the loss of one ward to be acceptable, thinking to take Shiki with the second. But now her blinding advance eliminates two of the wards in quick succession; two steps forward and two slashes swung gracefully from both flanks. And still she advances. She has just closed the previously six meter gap into zero. One more step, one more breath, timed with one more strike to end the game.

The sword comes from Alaya's right flank, and he sees the blade flow in a diagonal cut. Her speed almost seems to make time flow in discrete events rather than arbitrary measurements of seconds. The attack is similar to her previous two blows, and its telegraphed nature allows Alaya to dodge it by jumping back deeper into the hallway, widening the distance between the two. A brief pause as the mage studies his opponent with a glance.

From Shiki's lips, a single, straight line of fresh blood runs from mouth to chin. But Alaya knows she has taken no blow yet. Then it must be yesterday's wound. The broken ribs, the internal organ damage. Still in their fragile healing state, they must have been reopened, and even walking forces blood from her throat. She is clearly injured, and yet she dances with such single-mindedness. Alaya lets the right arm rest at his side.

That is, until he realizes there is no more arm. From the top of his shoulder all the way to his right chest, the clear traces of a clean strike can be seen, and on the floor lies his missing arm. His manipulation of space made the backstep he performed faster than any normal human, yet Shiki was still able to cut him with a strike so perfect that even the owner of the arm never noticed it until after the fact.

“What manner of creature—” Alaya leaves the question unfinished. Unmindful

of the injury, he focuses on his enemy. The strike could have been fatal. If his third ward had not been present, the slash would have dealt him a blow that would no doubt cut him in two. But it had instead slowed down Shiki's strike enough to save him. But Alaya is instead simultaneously fascinated by Shiki's complete difference from the night of their first duel. *Is it anger from what he did to Enjō? No, surely not.* He narrows his gaze at the girl in the white kimono.

Suddenly, she straightens herself and recovers a hand from the grip of the sword, releasing her tensed stance, suddenly turning back into the girl of last night. The recovered hand cups her mouth, and she coughs twice. The hand drips regurgitated blood. *If she did not have to fight such severe wounds, Alaya ponders, she would give me no respite.*

“You change with the weapon you hold,” the black-coated mage observes in astonishment. It is the reason she seems so different. Her extensive training in the dance of the sword changes her, forcing her into an almost trance-like state. Her mind compartmentalizes much like, as Alaya suspects, the past warriors did by training their mind to shape their bodies as a weapon. The fight was killing and survival, outside it was normalcy. “Hmph. A form of autohypnosis, as mages do when working the Art,” he mutters, his voice struggling to hold back the pain from his right arm.

Shiki shrugs. “Whatever you wanna call it, I guess.”

Alaya curses his own dismissal of her sudden shift in demeanor. *When she opened her eyes; that's when it must have occurred. To think the Ryōgi dynasty would still teach such vulgar disciplines.* He knew too that Shiki bridging the space between them in what almost seemed like one step was no coincidence. Her movement, the sway of her sword, her attention, all focused and refined to make her a deadly living weapon, and she was the only one who knew about it. He had thought her tools to be only the Arcane Eyes of Death Perception and her knife, but in truth, her skill with the sword is far greater.

“You have fooled me, Shiki Ryōgi. I had thought you had revealed all you could about your skill in combat when you danced with Fujino Asagami. But I see you have this one last trick.” Shiki shakes her head slowly in reply. Whether it is an affirmative or a disparaging negative, Alaya can't say. “And so we meet properly at last,” he shouts as he pressed down on the gaping wound of his

former right arm.

The girl in the white kimono reveals a smile, the first truly gentle smile she has performed; a smile that signals the end. Returning to her original hard posture, she runs toward Alaya like a loosed arrow. He knows that Shiki can read him now, knows what to expect, and so he won't be able to dodge this next strike. But he won't allow her to press the advantage so easily, not here in his sanctum. He gambles his chances on meeting Shiki's advance. He steps forward, and shouts.

**“DAKATSU!”** In time with this, Alaya raises his left arm in an attempt to block Shiki's attack. He hopes that the *sarira*—the sacred remains of devout masters—embedded within, will ward away most of the damage the slash will inflict. Even she will not easily be able to see the lines of entropy. Shiki's sword impacts his arm, and in an instant, Alaya can see that the blow has been checked.

As soon as he realizes this, he wastes no time in his next move. He animates his severed arm with an improvised working of the Art, making the arm move toward Shiki with unnatural speed. It slithers along the floor until, when it nears Shiki, it springs up and grabs her by the throat, pressing hard and choking her.

Shiki drops her guard at the move she couldn't anticipate, and Alaya presses the advantage he has momentarily gained. He retreats one step to pull back the left arm that warded off Shiki's previous attack, and extends it again with open palm right in front of Shiki.

**“SHUKU!”** He clenches his fist, and tightens space yet again. Shiki feels her body crumpling with a compelling force seeming to come from all places at once, and an audible grunt of pain finally escapes her lips. The leather jacket is torn away, and she is forced away from where she stood, Alaya having manipulated the space to compress to a size far smaller than it appeared to be.

At first, Shiki actually looks like she will fall hard to the floor from the attack, but she catches her footing just in time. Quickly, she redoubles her attack, the corridor funneling her into a singular path directly toward Alaya again and again. For a moment, she seems to disappear from Alaya's sight, but she has only bent low and run fast toward him, getting under his guard more quickly than he can react. The sword moves in a blur, and it instantly strikes Alaya right in his center

of mass.

The mage can feel his accumulated life ebbing away for only a fleeting instant. “Fool!” shouts Alaya as he attempts to deliver a kick towards Shiki’s midsection to ward her away. It’s an move easy to see, and so Shiki handily dodges it by jumping widely to the side, but the blade slides out of its shallow cut as she moves.

Alaya now understands. *If I want to stop her, the structure will have to go with it!* The mage opens his left hand to crush space for the third time. Having gained some distance from the jump, Shiki easily sees the spell coming. A quick but violent slash prevents it from manifesting any further around her. But after the slash, she stands stock still.

Alaya has completely vanished, black greatcoat and all.

*Nothing I can do about whatever magic he uses to move around, thinks Shiki. If he wants to run, I’ll let him run.* She runs to the edge of the hallway, with the view of the outside, and puts a hand on the railing as she casts her eyes below to find her target.

*But he’s not gonna get away this time. Without hesitation, Shiki leaps over the edge.*

Away from Shiki, Alaya begins to crush the building itself. It might damage Shiki’s body, the same body he planned on using, but as long as he can still restore it to some semblance of a human function, then let its shape be damned. Even if the skull is shattered and the gray matter scattered, it can be replaced. What matters to him is that the body not expire completely until he works upon it, so that he can tap the soul connected to the spiral of origin.

The loss of his arm and the stab on his chest are nothing compared to the ultimate goal, the ars magna to which he has struggled toward these many years. As long as he reaches the spiral of origin, where everything begins and ends, all is well. What he must do remains the same, only delayed now.

*This seems to be the only option now to prevent a stalemate between us, Alaya thinks. Had I only killed her outright, it would not have come to this. Still, it has*

*come, and I must close this chapter of her life.*

Weaving the Art and relocating him through space, Alaya has placed himself in the garden outside the building, which as far as he is concerned, feels like stepping out of his own body. He sees the greenery that surrounds the building often, but it has been so long since he has set foot in it. Though a part of the grounds, the dominating will of his subjective reality that strengthened him so much inside has little effect here. After he emerges from his relocation, he wastes no time. He looks up and extends his remaining arm skyward to point to the very top of the cylindrical structure, opening his palm.

The next thing he knows, a vicious cut goes straight down and through his left shoulder.

The next thing he knew, a vicious cut went straight down and through his left shoulder.

“Shiki...Ryōgi,” he manages to gurgle out with difficulty as he looks up at the night sky. “You damned...fool of a woman.” He coughs, and blood emerges red and blooming from his mouth. Not given a chance to land on either himself or Shiki, the droplets of blood are carried away on the wind only a few feet away, but now a distance he can no longer traverse. “All this...impossible.”

Alaya had emerged in the grounds outside the building, looked up at the structure to work his spell, only to meet the fleeting sight of Shiki Ryōgi falling rapidly from the tenth floor. Which means there was little interval between the mage’s weaving of his relocation spell, and the girl’s thoughtless descent from the highest floor of the building. What confidence possessed her at that moment, he will never know. He suspects he would never be able to know. How could Shiki have known that he would appear in the grounds outside? And even given this, who would even think to jump off and think they would land safely? To aim and hit a lone man from that height at that nearly uncontrolled fall is an act that has gone well past recklessness and into the realm of some miraculous foresight. As if she’d *known*.

And yet she did it. Without Alaya not having even completed the spell, having not even manifested in the garden yet, she jumped and did it. And at almost the exact same time as he appeared, he was struck by Shiki’s blow. The arm that he

had extended upward very quickly became an improvised shield, but it was not enough to stop the slash from landing in his left shoulder, reaching all the way to his abdomen. Even the arcane shield that the *sarira* in his arm had afforded him was not enough to stop the sheer force of it.

As for Shiki, she is unconscious and still, standing but leaning on the blade inside Alaya's body. Ironically, for all the defenses Alaya put up—his arm, the protection of the *sarira*, and the last ward that he had managed to erect at the last moment—Shiki broke through all of them and they served only to cushion her fall. Without them, the fall would have been fatal at worst, or aggravated her internal damage and killed her eventually at best. Another miracle.

Her grip on the sword is tight as rigor mortis. Alaya's brow clouds his already anguished face as he looks upon the unconscious Shiki. "You were prepared to risk it all on one gamble to kill me. No, if not through this, than through another way, surely. You could kill me. Perhaps it was no risk at all. It is a poor sight to see Sōren Alaya defeated by a neophyte such as you." His words this time finally ring without his previous posturing.

Alaya's left arm is virtually severed, and the right is long gone. The mage, still standing, kicks the unconscious Shiki away, striking her chest. Her body flies away from him and a few feet deeper into the grounds. But Shiki continues to cling tightly to the sword hilt, even as it is still embedded in the mage's body. So the blade, having also been weakened by the impact of the fall, is now forced into two: one half remaining embedded in Alaya's body, and the other half in Shiki's possession. And with that, the four hundred years of its history come to an end.

Shiki, now collapsed on the garden soil, remains unmoving. Looking at her with displeasure, he mutters. "You lie there finally wearing the look of a girl your age." The mage, too, is unmoving as his face grows dark. The last bit of his energy has been expended in kicking Shiki away, and now he can't do anything. For he feels that the slash has struck more than just the body: one of his lines of death must have been cut. "Through that appearance, I know we will never do battle again."

The mage dispels the ward that is already fading fast, and whispers to himself in a sort of prayer. "My origin is known to me. It is quiescence. Those whose

origin is awokened returns soon to the spiral.”

## Chapter 19

Only the moonlight shining above seems alive in this green fakery of a lawn. Here, Shiki lies, fallen and unconscious, while a fair distance away is the mage in the black greatcoat who has lost both arms. Stepping out of the shadow of the shadow of trees and foliage is another mage, walking collectedly with the air of one heading home after a simple stroll.

“So this, too, ends in failure, Alaya,” says Tōko. Alaya provides her no reply. “A cruel state you find yourself in. You began your chronicle of death, created your own twisted world, carried the weight of anguish that all the people in it experienced. And for what? Why did you have to be so obsessed? Why do you seek the spiral of origin so selflessly? Did you dream, as you once did, of saving this race of men?” Her voice is pitying, almost sad in her own way.

A pause. A beat. Then, “The reason is long lost to memory.” He retreats within himself, to remember.

In a long forgotten time, he realized that he could not save anyone. As long as there is life, there will be no real justice. Joy will not be realized for all men. What of the individuals who cannot find their salvation? Is there no answer to them? The dice game played by God did not seem to bring justice to the right individuals, and when he realized this, he realized that salvation does not come naturally to this world.

And so he decided to chronicle deaths. Make a record of all until their end, and until this material world expires. Through it, he can sift through the patterns and discern what real happiness is. If he could see the streams tracing out into the

infinite, observe all those whose lives lacked for justice and deliverance, then perhaps he could arrive at something that could be called true joy. Perhaps he could give meaning to all the meaningless deaths. If the world and everyone in it reached their end, then he could observe the true worth of mankind. And even in the simplicity of that observation, there was value. That was the only common salvation he could find for him and man.

At the scratching sound of Tōko lighting up a cigarette with a lighter, Alaya's reverie is broken.

"Lost to memory, huh? I wonder, then, what to make of you," Tōko says. "I was never capable of anything grand. I only ever desired a definitive conclusion. If the sole matter that these mortals could ever leave to history is the ugliness of their existence, then at the very least I can declare that that is their worth. If I could observe that a lifetime of injustice is their legacy, then I have at least observed it, and it would have been enough," Alaya says, without looking at Tōko directly. Tōko does the same, staring up with disdain and a frown at the night sky.

"Which is why you had to reach the spiral of origin. Yes, I see it now. Because there lies the record of everything, from beginning to end, and there you could observe it. You wanted everyone to die to observe the worth of humanity from your little perch high above everyone."

"Only a few steps remained to be taken, but again reality had to have its way. It taunts me by presenting me with the vessel to open the path, only to have it hinder my progress. Truly an unstoppable force. Though I took pains so that no one would know it, so that no one would trigger the paradox that would scour this pocket realm from the pattern of reality; Even when I was prepared, I was stopped. This force that ensures the continued existence of the world was my true enemy." Alaya's words come out in rasps and rough bursts of stuttered words. He is already starting to ebb away.

Tōko sighs deeply. "Reality? No, Alaya. This time it wasn't the Deterrent that stopped you. You did what you could do perfectly, and the Deterrent did not act. Believe it or not, you were—indirectly at least—done in by Tomoe Enjō and the simple affection he still held for his family."

But Alaya refuses to believe that he was defeated by such a simple thing; he, who had deceived reality and made it his enemy. “Even if that were true, it must have been the Deterrent that empowered him so; made him make the decisions and courses of action that would lead him to my defeat. He did not act out of love for his family. Humans act only out of survival, and hide it with such pithy decorations as affection.” The hatred in his voice is thick, but Tōko only shrugs it off.

For she understands that Alaya views himself not as a man now, but as the carrier of an ideal. A man driven so much and for so long as to become a symbol is no longer human as she knows it. Tōko remembers the time when she was a neophyte, when Alaya had made what once thought was a simple observation, but ultimately became his most profound: *the enemy of all mages is my enemy. My enemy is consensus*. Though she knows it is futile in these final moments to tell him, she continues her parting words to the friend and man she once knew.

“There’s one last thing I should tell you, Alaya. It’s pretty good. I don’t know if you know him, but a famous psychiatrist once had this idea of a collective unconscious. It’s the idea of a big mental pool where all the archetypes of humanity’s collective history and ideas reside. It should sound familiar to a Buddhist concept you already know. This is not the Gaia theory, but similar to the consensus of collective humankind. Buddhists call it the alaya-shiki.”

“Wh—what?” Alaya says, the word coming out haltingly. Tōko ignores him.

“Don’t you find it strange, Sōren Alaya? You were born with a name that tied you always toward your objective, and you never knew it. As if reality itself snared you from the beginning. You wrought many paradoxes today, but it was you who were the grandest paradox of them all.” Tōko’s words bury themselves deep in Alaya’s mind, encroaching on his thoughts to shake the foundations of what he stood for. Though he doesn’t answer her, the intensity of his eyes start to fade. But his burdened expression still stands. *Until the end, probably*, Tōko thinks.

Without acknowledging Tōko’s words, Alaya speaks. “This body has reached its end.”

“And you’ll start again from scratch, I presume. For what must be the nth time.

You really are obstinate, you know that?” That life, Tōko knew, was also a spiral. Finally turning her frown to Alaya, she throws the cigarette on the ground and puts it out, never actually putting it in her mouth. She never really hated the man. Because she realizes quite seriously that if she had made just one mistake...or perhaps had not made a mistake, she would have become quite like him: someone not truly human, but just the avatar of an idea, devoted wholly to a single theory.

Alaya coughs violently, and blood comes out of his mouth yet again. Though delayed by the sheer weight of his years of life, Shiki’s Eyes finally work their craft slowly but surely on Alaya’s body, reducing it to a gray ash of decay starting from his left shoulder.

“I have no other vessel with which to ferry my soul. But the wheel turns, and when the cycle presses me back into the material world, it will be hundreds of years hence.”

“At which point there will be no more mages, or the Art, or sorcery. The consensus is winning. And you are, as you always will be, alone. But I know you still wouldn’t stop.”

“Of course. I am not defeated.”

Tōko closes her eyes, the years of their separation and their scant hours of catching up now both concluded. Eyes closed, Tōko Aozaki asks her last questions of Sōren Alaya.

“What do you seek, Alaya?”

“True wisdom.” His arm fades into nothingness.

“Where do you seek it, Alaya?”

“Nowhere else but within me.” As his left half turns to ash and dances in the wind, the black greatcoat falls away. In Alaya’s last moments, Tōko opens her eyes to see him through to the end.

“Where do your struggles lead you, Alaya?”

But before he can answer, the last of Sōren Alaya wastes away. Tōko feels, though, that she knows what he would have answered.

*Beyond this spiraling material world of paradox.*

Tōko casts her eyes away from the gray ash riding on the wind and takes another cigarette from her pocket and lights it. The smoke dances to and fro like an impossible, unreal illusion.

Though I can't seem to recall the how and why, I find myself walking through the city. The weather is pleasant, and the sky above is blue as far as the eye can see. Though there isn't a cloud in the sky to cover the sun, the white, dream-like sunlight is warm but not truly bothersome. But it does cast the city and the main avenue in the faint haze of a mirage, bathing it in the atmosphere of some vast desert. Since November came around, it's always been cloudy day after cloudy day, but today, in my dark red kimono, it feels like a day right out of summer.

Eventually, I enter a café that I've been visiting a lot lately. The café, Ahnenerbe, seems much moodier than it usually is. Maybe it's because the quality of today's sunlight—the lack of electric light making sunlight from the windows its only method of lighting—only serves to make the shadowed parts much more pronounced. It's probably what the customers want anyway.

I see an unoccupied table, its surface plain and simple, beside an open window, being bathed by a stream of white sunlight. Right behind it is another table, where the light doesn't reach and is cast in dry darkness. This contrast that drapes an air of churchly solemnity about the entire thing is what makes the place popular among a certain crowd. Today, I'm part of that crowd.

The two tables I saw are the only ones that aren't taken, and I take a seat on the table by the window. By chance, I sit at the same time as another guy, a teenager who takes the other empty table. And so I wait, and the teenager waits as well, sitting with our backs to each other.

The silence is almost a miracle unto itself. I keep my peace like the rest of the people around me, and my normally short fuse doesn't manifest as I wait without

complaint. While contemplating the reason for my rare silence, I find satisfaction in the fact that the person sitting behind me seems to be waiting in vain like I am. The fact that I have a kindred spirit somehow makes me feel at ease.

After a long time, the idiot I'm waiting for finally shows up, visible outside the window waving a hand at me. It looks like he ran to get here, seeing as he's out of breath. I wonder if he's okay. After all, he's the one that chooses to wear a black getup in such a fine, sunny day like this. He's going to have to change that sooner or later. I look again, and there is someone else outside the window: a woman in a white dress.

I stand up, and at the same time, the guy behind me stands up as well.

I feel some relief, as it seems the woman in the white dress is the person this guy was waiting for. With a sigh, I head for the café's exit. Strangely enough, the establishment has two exits on opposite ends, one on its east and another on its west side. As I walk toward the west exit, the guy walks similarly toward the east exit. Before I exit the café, I look over my shoulder once, only to see the guy looking over his shoulder as well. The fellow is red-haired, with a thin frame. When our eyes meet, he turns away and raises a hand. I too, turn away, and raise a hand. A greeting. And yet, though I hear no voice, I could almost imagine him saying goodbye. Voiceless, I too say goodbye, and make my way out of the café.

Outside, the atmosphere is still bathed in an oppressive white haze. The heat must have gotten stronger, as I feel like I could sweat in a matter of minutes. Under this intense sunlight, I walk toward the man waving his hand at me. For reasons I can't discern, I feel relieved and pained at the same time. Though I try to block out the sunlight with my hand, it is still strong enough to hide the man's face.

I pray to some God that the red-haired guy was also walking like this, to a place where he could meet that someone he was waiting for. The solemn air of a church inside Ahnenerbe must have really gotten to me if even I can catch myself praying. When I turn around to look back at it, the café is gone, replaced instead by a level plain stretching far away to the horizon. Nothing is left. Somehow, though, I knew it.

I once thought that to live was to leave nothing behind. But I remember what

someone once said to me: that life is when you try to leave nothing behind, but instead leave everything.

Somewhere, a doorbell chime rings out. When I hear it, I realize that I am in a whimsical dream. Leaving behind the beautiful city of the desert, I slowly wake up.

The doorbell rings for a second time, and I push my body up from the bed. The clock beside the bed says that it's only around nine o' clock or so. Seeing as I went out last night for my usual stroll and slept at five in the morning, nine o' clock is hardly a perfect time to wake up.

The doorbell rings for a third time. Naturally, the only one who would be persistent enough to keep ringing like that would be someone who knows I'm here, and that someone is probably Mikiya. My mind is still swimming as I sit on top of the bed, recovering from a strange dream. All the more reason to ignore Mikiya right now. Let him think I'm asleep. I snatch the pillow from the head of the bed, hold it close, and lie back down again.

The ringing stops. "Hah. I knew he'd give up," I whisper as I pull my blanket back up and try to fall back to sleep.

Suddenly I hear the sound of the lock opening by key, and the door opens. I open my eyes in surprise and start to get up, but he's already in. "Ah, so you were awake, Shiki," Mikiya says. He has in one hand a plastic bag from a convenience store. The thought of where on Earth he got a key to my apartment occupies me, and I don't manage to catch myself glaring at him fairly sternly.

"Don't think you get to have any of this," he suddenly sputters out as he hides the plastic bag behind him. "I need to eat my breakfast too." There is a second or two before I get what he's talking about, since I'm thinking of something completely different.

"Trespassing. That's what this is," I declare. "And me? Eat that cheap trash? Don't make me laugh."

"Oh, thank god, I get to have a breakfast at your place without you pinching food from my plate for once. Maybe you've beaten the habit." Mikiya starts to take out the food from the plastic bag and line them up on the floor. I pass a good minute just looking at him like this.

It's been two weeks since the business in the Ōgawa Apartments. Mikiya had to go to the hospital for his leg injury. My own injuries, which were far more serious, took only a week and a few days to heal, which the doctor attributed to my health. Mikiya still has to go to the hospital for checkups. He can walk, and even run, but the doctor said to avoid the latter until he was completely fine. I remember Mikiya laughing, then saying to the doctor that he tries to avoid running even without an injury.

We haven't talked about the Ōgawa Apartment once since. We didn't feel the need to. In the past two weeks, though, I can sometimes see Mikiya's face becoming more serious for what seems to be no reason, and you'd actually have to touch him for him to snap back to reality and hear you. It's those times that I know that he's thinking back on it. For my part, my mind keeps going back to the erstwhile roommate of one month that brought an unexpected change in my life, and it frustrates me.

"Um, you know," Mikiya suddenly says with hesitation. He's splitting his chopsticks with his back turned to me.

"What?" I ask dryly, already sensing what he would talk about.

"I heard from Miss Tōko that it's slated for demolition. The apartment, I mean."

"Is that so? But what about the residents? And the stuff there? All those things..." My voice trails off.

"Miss Tōko said not to worry about that. She said that 'mages take care of mage business,' and that some guys from the Ordo came and handled all that. They made the fictional families disappear, putting them as 'moved' in the records. They even destroyed everything under the building. They're a pretty powerful bunch, if they can do all of that." He gulps. "They're going to demolish the building this noon, I hear."

So he came here to tell me that. I know I'm not going to see it; nor, I felt, would Mikiya. Still, he told me because he thought I should know.

"It's too soon," I murmur vaguely.

"It is, isn't it?" Mikiya says. And with those statements, it feels as though we

ourselves consigned the Ōgawa Apartments to the past. “But at least all the reasons for these incidents centered on you must be over now. I know I’ve been an outsider to most of them, but this should be the end of them.” He pauses, then, “You should go back to school regularly. If you don’t get that high school diploma and graduate, you’re gonna make Akitaka sad.”

“What? Me going to school has nothing to do with the weird shit. First off, didn’t these incidents only start to pop up after you got associated with Tōko? And second, remove the log from your own eye first before you start messing with splinters. How do you think you can get off lecturing me on going back to school when you’ve stopped going to college yourself?”

“Ouch, sucker punch to the gut right there,” he mutters before smiling and sighing. Hah, that line never fails to shut him up.

And so we spend the morning together. Though it’s both our days off, Mikiya decides to stay in my room instead of going out, while I lie in bed, badly needing sleep but staying awake just to keep the guy company. Mikiya is seated on the floor, his back resting on my bed behind him. A month ago, the scene was somewhat different.

My mind wanders back to the other man, seated where Mikiya is now. He’s gone now, and this room has returned to the way it was before he was here. That he had to die makes me feel a pang of regret, a hollow in the soul. Though I tell myself it’s only a small hole, it envelops me in a sensation as disquieting as what I had five months ago, when I recovered from the coma.

And then, a thought comes to mind unbidden. If him dying unsettles me this much, how much more so if the guy sitting beside my bed right now disappears? He’s a part of both the *Shiki Ryōgi* of the past, and the new memories that started in June to the five months from then until now. It’s a period of time filled with a lot of honestly trifling things, but even so, the memories deserve better than to just be thrown away. And so I keep them tucked away like little treasures in my soul.

I still have parts of my memory that I can’t rightly remember. Hollows in the soul, Tōko called it. I still remember her telling me in her best important-sounding voice: *a hollow has to be filled with something*. It’s still as true now.

So, I wonder, when in these five months of personal episodes great and small did I find the time to decide that Mikiya would be that something?

“Say, Kokutō.” I really hate the sound of that name, but I say it anyway. I’ve grown to see my past as an entirely different person, and started to dislike mimicking my past self. Still, the name, its sound and tone, is my last connection to the past I still can’t let go completely. Mikiya obviously doesn’t see the same significance in it as I do, since he doesn’t turn to look at me. In one of the rare times I have something important to say, he’s lost in one of his paperback literature classics. Typical.

I just say what I need to say anyway: “The key.”

That gets his attention. “Hmm?”

I turn my face away from him and hold a hand out to him, a hand still marked with gashes by the sword hilt I held two weeks ago. This is just some impromptu thing I thought about, but I say it.

“I don’t have a key to your room. That’s not so fair.”

I know I’m blushing like a kid as I ask for such a little thing, but I can’t seem to stop it. I’ll chalk it up to the weird dream I had before I woke up.

And so I let this normal, spiraling day pass like any other, keeping company with a person so peaceful he could never have damaged the serenity of the day.

The season is winter, and a rare snow falls upon the city, the first of its kind it has seen in four years.

Like the night *Shiki Ryōgi* and Mikiya Kokutō first met, the snow on the ground will in time be drenched with a vivid red.



奈須蘑菇

火之境

THE GARDEN OF SIGHERS 下



# **Empty Boundaries: Volume III**

**The Garden of Sinners**

**by Kinoko Nasu (奈須 きのこ)**

## **Stories by Kinoko Nasu**

### **Novels**

Empty Boundaries (空の境界) Series

Volume I: Panorama, The First Homicide Inquiry, Lingering Pain

Volume II: A Hallow, Paradox Spiral

Volume III: Records in Oblivion, The Second Homicide Inquiry

Decoration Disorder Disconnection Series

Junk the Eater

HandS

Angel Notes

Mage's Night (魔法使いの夜)

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Fate/stay night

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Melty Blood

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### Empty Boundaries

#### Empty Boundaries





忘却録  
6

Records in Oblivion  
Fairy Tale.

Beyond the briar's thorns there once was a deep forest, wrapped in fog.

From it wafted the smell of green and the tiny whispers of insects.

And deep into it, I passed.

And further still did I walk.

Until I chanced upon a knoll untouched by our sun, where I found myself in the company of children.

And finally I did come to my senses, and realizing the lateness of the hour, resolved to press home.

“But you needn’t go home. For here, your eternity awaits.”

The forest children began to sing.

And I wondered what eternity was.

“It is when you linger.”

“It is when you are unchanging.”

The chorus of cradles recited in melancholy unison.

Starlight shone quietly on the grass of the mound. The fog flowed together like purest milk behind me. And over my shoulder, the path home had been lost.

I know little of this eternity.

I try to hurry home.

To a home far from this place.

A home far from the children and the forest.

And wrapped in the smell of green and the tiny whispers of insects, Inside the deep forest, wrapped in fog beyond the briar's thorns, They denied me home for an eternity.

## **Records in Oblivion - I**

December this year was less cold than I had anticipated, but was still enough to bring a white cloud of breath with every whisper. Nevertheless, yesterday was its final day, and with it, the final day of the year. Today is a new year, my sixteenth one. Surely, for many people around the world today, they are greeting each other in a warm “Happy New Year,” treasuring the one chance in a year they can share the warmth and sense of new opportunity with other people.

Not for me, though. In fact, New Year to me has become the time of the year where I want to chide myself for my stupidity, a time when the pillows in my room are in danger of my desire to hurl them against the wall and stomp on them to vent; a time where I just want to will the rest of the day away. Sadly, human hearts and memory are not such convenient things. And so it is with a certain glumness of spirit that I hurry and make my preparations to go to Miss Tōko’s office.

Though I belong to a thoroughly pedestrian household, my family still Insists that I dress in a kimono for the first shrine visit of the New Year. Indeed, they’ve already lain it out for me in my bed. Still, I’ve never been one for the traditional clothing, so I ignore it and head out of my room to go downstairs.

“Oh, Azaka dear, are you going out?” my mother asks as I climb down the stairs

“Yes. Just going to meet someone who I owe a favor to. I’ll be home before dark,” I say with my best smile as I depart from the Kokutō residence—my household.

The sky of the early afternoon day is filled with clouds, and not too friendly ones, it seems. Still, I think for a while that it reflects my mood perfectly, and just that little bit of acknowledgement (by the world no less!) eases my steps just a bit.

I didn't always hate this particular time of the year. There was a time when, just like any other person, I actually looked forward to it. But it was in 1996, exactly three years ago from this day, when that changed; my thirteenth New Year when I went back to my real home for the holidays. The story truly starts with me, Azaka Kokutō, and the weak constitution that my body was cursed with. I've never had any high grades in PE, and everyone could tell the Tōkyō air was bad for my continued health. And so with that reason, the family packed me away to live with my uncle in the countryside when I was only ten years old. Since then, I only came home during summer and winter breaks, but even then I couldn't stand to go back. My uncle treated me like his own adopted daughter, and raised me away from my family. I preferred to keep it that way—even past the point where my constitution eventually improved to become normal and render the entire arrangement moot—for my own reasons.

For you see, I have a brother, Mikiya Kokutō. And I love him.

To clarify, this is not, as you might be suspecting, the familial love between close siblings, but the romantic sort of love between a boy and a girl. Of course, one might suspect that a ten year old elementary school girl might be mistaken, and it would not be wrong to assume such a conclusion. But I was no idiot, even back then, and I knew better than most exactly what sort of affection I was entertaining. And though I can accept my assumption of my possession of higher than average intelligence as a comfortable lie I can tell myself, I cannot accept that my feelings for Mikiya are anything other than real. Once I even harbored childish thoughts of somehow spiriting him away from other people, never to let another see him. Though my feelings have since taken on a more sensible form, my fondness for Mikiya never wavered. I've known from the start that this was a feeling never to be voiced, so as I grew older, I only waited, biding my time for a chance.

Even my retreat to the countryside was all part of my elaborate plan to separate

myself from Mikiya, all for the sake of building in him a propensity to see in me something else, something other than being his little sister. I don't care what it says in the family registry. I left that behind long ago, and I'll only truly come back after Mikiya's forgotten me as a sister completely. Until then, though, I'd spend my days like a lady of manners. After all, I know exactly what Mikiya likes, so this was a fairly simple process. It was a plan so perfect even I have to marvel at its genius.

But then of course, a meddler had to make her goddamned appearance. Pardon my words. It was three years ago, back in my junior high school days when I first explored the notions of love. It was the winter holidays, and I went back to the house when, of all the stupidest things to do, Mikiya brought home a classmate of his. It was clear for anyone to see that he and this woman named Shiki Ryōgi were dating. And when I saw this, I had the curious and not altogether pleasant feeling of having baked yourself a lovely cake, only for it to be beset by the desperate and hungry the moment you look away. The thought that my brother, who always seemed so aloof before, would now be dating a girl, had never entered my wildest imaginings. I mean, think about it. He'd never even so much as looked *that* way at any woman before, let alone had a relationship with one!

I think I spent the next few days after that in a complete daze, sleepwalking maybe, until I finally came back to the countryside. It was not long after that when, still in distress over what to do about the girl, I got wind of the traffic accident and coma that befell Shiki Ryōgi. And so Mikiya was alone once again. I must confess that when Mikiya told me the news by letter as I sipped my tea on the terrace of my uncle's house, that I sympathized with the poor girl. Even though I only met her once, I remember her laughing heartily at what Mikiya had to say, her attitude full of energy. But I would be lying if I didn't say that I felt some measure of relief. No girl of idle interest like Shiki would ever catch Mikiya's eye again. All I need do was graduate high school with recognition, and get myself into a sufficiently reputable university. Only a few more steps; a few more years—perhaps eight—until the notion of my sibling relationship with Mikiya was severed.

But my enemy proved herself to be no common ken indeed, because only last

spring, Shiki regained her consciousness. Mikiya was beside himself with joy at the news as he told me over the phone, but it only served to harden my resolve. I would say nothing to him about my feelings, but only until I graduate from high school. I would need to be frank with myself, more so than before. And from there, I picked up the pace. My choice of high school was perfect: a boarding school called Reien Girl's Academy, where tax bracket mattered more than grades when entering. This suited me perfectly, as did my uncle, who, being a painter and artist, was only too eager to ingratiate himself with potential patrons by my presence in the institution. And so I lodged there, to become a lady in their fashion.

It's been half a year since my entry there, and now I'm living another accursed New Year, again reminding me of Shiki's continued existence. I'd actually planned to go to the shrine with Mikiya today, but that got soured easily enough when Shiki came by earlier and left with him. Strange how fickle such things tend to be in my life, and how she always seems to be at the center of it all.

I make my way toward the bay area, the sight of the once great factories serving as my guide. The old industrial area by the bay is still home to some active steelworks, but by and large it is a place of rusted smokestacks and crumbling brick walls, of old and abandoned warehouses, some of which still have asbestos flocked within ceilings. In the midst of it all stands the shell of an office building, remaining eternally unfinished in its construction; no doubt the last hope to revitalize the district, only to falter and fail. My tutor in the Art of magic, Tōko Aozaki, somehow got her hands on it (through means I am not entirely confident are legal), and made an office of sorts there, for her "business."

When I reach the building, I go in and climb the staircase, each click of my heels on the steps an echo. The first floor is a garage, and only Miss Tōko herself knows what lurks in the second and third, and the fourth is the office where me and my brother Mikiya often end up in; Mikiya as an employee, and I as an apprentice. I open the door on the fourth floor office and announce my arrival with a lazy greeting.

"Happy New Year."

“Mmhmm. Happy New Year,” says Miss Tōko with an equally languid expression on her face.

Somehow, the usual severity that Miss Tōko commands doesn’t seem to diminish her good looks at all. In fact, in tandem with her white blouse and black trousers, it makes her seem more in control, if anything. With her glasses off, as they are now, you might even doubt for a moment if she was actually a woman.

“Weren’t you planning to go out with brother dearest today?” she asks with a characteristic lack of restraint from behind her work desk.

“I was, but Shiki came along and spirited him away. Still, aren’t you glad I’m even in today instead of gallivanting about with Mikiya?”

“That I am. I have some business to talk about with you, actually.” That’s strange. It’s very rare for Miss Tōko to involve me in her business. I make her a cup of coffee, and whip up some tea for myself, before finally taking a seat for myself.

“So, what is it you wanted to speak to me about?”

She puts her hands behind her head and leans back on her chair. “Just wondering whether you’ve confessed to Kokutō yet.”

Oh, for heaven’s sake. I can tell from her tone that she’s not at all serious about this.

“*No, I haven’t.* And it’ll be that way until after high school, at the very least. Now is there actually anything significant in my answer that made you *so* anxious to ask me?”

“Nah. Just speculating on how calm your answer would still be if I asked the same question with Kokutō present. I suppose I still wonder how totally different you both are yet you still find an attraction for him. Maybe you’re adopted. Ever considered that?” The tips of her lips rise into that familiar sly bend of a smile.

“Now I really don’t know if you’re joking or not,” I reply, but holding in the frown I was supposed to make at her. As if she somehow still read this, Miss Tōko chuckles lightly.

“Ah, Azaka, you carry yourself with such scholarly grace, but sometimes the

purity in your answers is so refreshing. Forgive me and my stupid questions. I need to get it out of my system at least once a year, shouldn't I?" "Well, I'd say you're off to a roaring great start to the year then. Anyway, what was it you really wanted to talk about?"

"Something about your school. You're in your first year in Reien Girl's Academy, right? The way I hear it, something interesting happened to class D of the freshman year. You wouldn't know anything about it, would you?" Class D? I think I have a hunch what she's talking about. "The class with Kaori Tachibana in it, right? Unfortunately, I'm in class A, so I know very little about the goings-on in class D."

"Kaori Tachibana, you say? Can't say I recognize the name. Not on the list I have, at least." Miss Tōko frowns, like she's wracking her brain for something she missed. I tilt my head slightly to the side, wondering if there's some miscommunication between me and her.

"Er...what's all of this about?" I mutter.

"So you don't know," she sighs. "Guess I should've expected it, seeing as Reien Academy tries to isolate each class from another. Only the girls in class D would know more, I suppose," she concludes. "Anyway, let me tell you what I know about it."

Miss Tōko begins to tell the story of a strange incident that happened only two weeks ago. Just before winter vacation, two students of Reien Girl's Academy's senior high school class 4-D had some kind of argument, and in the end, tried to stab each other with box cutters. For such a thing to happen at Reien, which is, at the best of times, eerily still and silent that it seems almost like a place hermetically sealed-off from the rest of the world, strikes me as supremely odd. Worse, I never knew about it, a fact which I can probably blame on the school's practice of separating each class from each other, and their tendency to cover up anything that might paint a bad picture of the institution.

"That's horrible," I say, after Miss Tōko is done with the story. "Are their injuries serious?"

"Nothing too serious. I'm actually more interested in the fact that they attacked each other at all."

“Yes, I see what you mean. Reien is generally not the place you’d find the type of people who’d try a knife fight in the halls. Whatever its cause, it must have been something serious, or something far back in their past. Or both.”

“Right. The subject of their quarrel comes later. There’s an even stranger tidbit here. No doubt you’re wondering why you didn’t know about this earlier. Reien’s policy on these things can be blamed up to a point, but it largely isn’t their fault this time. It’s just that it wasn’t immediately reported. It was only when the school’s Mother Superior looked through the infirmary’s records did she find the names of the two girls, and the cause of their wounds. She suspected class D’s homeroom instructor of deliberately hiding the incident.”

That would be Hideo Hayama, once Reien’s only male instructor, and one of the only two in its history. But he’d already left, having taken responsibility for the breakout of a fire last November. He was promptly sacked and replaced, not by a nun as per usual, but by…

“Mr. Kurogiri? No way. It can’t be him,” I suddenly find myself saying. Miss Tōko offers a nod.

“The Mother Superior said as much. Apparently, this Satsuki Kurogiri fellow took to the job well, and became trusted by everyone almost immediately. When the Mother Superior interviewed him about the incident, he supposedly couldn’t recall anything about the incident happening under his watch. She had to go and recite the particulars of the incident to even make the guy remember. She couldn’t pry a thing out of Satsuki, and he genuinely seemed to have forgotten about the entire thing. Never struck the Mother Superior as a man to tell stories. Since he’d proven his trustworthiness before to both the faculty and the students, the Mother Superior had to let him go.”

But how can a man forget something so important in only two weeks? It just doesn’t seem possible. At the same time, I myself can’t see a reason why Mr. Kurogiri would have any reason to break the school’s trust in him.

“As for the reason the students took a stab at each other in the first place,” Miss Tōko continues, “all the other students heard about it, since the two girls started arguing in the classroom just after class when people were filing out in the halls. Apparently they each somehow knew of some old secrets they were

keeping from each other. And here's the kicker. When they were interviewed, they were both secrets that both of them had already forgotten."

"What? That sounds—"

"Ridiculous, I know. These girls were childhood friends. The Mother Superior described them as always being together. Somehow, this secret got out and ruined all that. I think they both said when they were questioned that it was close to a month ago when they got a letter in the mail, and at first they couldn't figure out anything about what the letter was referring to. Then, of course, they later understood what it was about. It told of old secrets taht they both didn't want the other to know. They confronted each other, and found out that both had been sent a letter of the same nature before they busted out the box cutters and started attacking each other."

I don't know what to say. Forgotten memories and secrets being mentioned in a letter sent by someone who they didn't know, somewhere in the country?

"You're thinking this is a new case, aren't you, Miss Tōko?"

"Maybe. The letters didn't have anything else written on them. No threats, no demands. Not even a stalker could watch both girls 24/7 enough to even figure out the past that even they forgot about. If there's a mage's hand in all of this, I wouldn't be surprised. I only wonder what the ultimate objective is."

The ominous tone of the story starts to sink in. Discounting the damaging contents of the letter, it might be interesting, even funny, for you to receive letters about your life at first and not know where they're coming from. But give it a month and see if you still feel the same way. Letters about you containing facets of your life that even you didn't know about, written by somebody you don't know, some unknown figure who watches you day in and day out. The paranoia that gripped the two girls must have eaten away at them. It's little wonder they were driven to such desperate suspicion.

"Have they found out who sent the letters?" I ask.

"Yep. Fairies, they say," Miss Tōko states succinctly.

"Pardon me. Could you repeat that?" I don't know if my astonishment at what she just said registered in my voice or not.

“Fairies, like I said. What, you don’t know about them? Even when so many students in Reien say they see them? I suppose you really aren’t gifted with Arcane Eyes, but it’s sort of a famous rumor among the students. Fairies, they say, will play beside your pillow at night, and when you wake up, you’d find some of the memories of the past few days will have gone as cleanly as though they never happened. If it’s true, and not just some crazy rumor, the fairies are stealing the memories for some purpose. My gut tells me there’s a connection to this and the incident in class D,” she explains patiently.

Though I still study the Art under her guidance, and I’ve seen wonders of thaumaturgy performed that are a true sight to behold, I still find the fairy story hard to believe.

“Do you think it’s true, then, Miss Tōko? This fanciful story about fairies?”

“I can’t say anything about something I haven’t seen yet, but if there’s any place for fairies to be, it’s got to be Reien. Think about it. It’s perfect for them: Isolated in the sticks, where you can’t even hear the faintest whine of a car engine, maintained by some of the sternest rules and quiet nuns, that don’t permit the latest in youth culture to seep into the institution they’ve built. The forest that takes up the larger portion of the grounds is deep and large enough to get yourself lost for half a day if you’re not careful. The air is tinged with fragrance sweet enough to make you stay and pass the time staring at a clock’s minute hand and its lazy progression. Sounds pretty much like a fairy freehold to me.”

“Wow, I am surprised you know the campus so...intimately, Miss Tōko.”  
“Obviously. I’m an alumnus there, after all.”

This time, I make sure to have my voice sound truly astonished. “WHAT!?”

“Stop giving me that look,” Miss Tōko says with an eyebrow raised. “What, you thought Mother Riesbyfe would just mouth off the latest school gossip to an outsider? She’s the one that contacted me last night to see if I could do anything to get to the bottom of what’s happening in there. I don’t exactly run a detective agency here, but I couldn’t turn down the Mother Superior either. Now, I can’t go in there again, since I’d stand out too much. I wouldn’t get a word out of anyone. So I thought long and hard—” she draws the two words out with a smile on her face “—on who could do it for me... Azaka?”

No. I turn away from her. I don't want to hear what I think she's about to say. She looks at me with sharply narrowing eyes before she continues. "Oh come now, Azaka. It can be fun! I mean, come on, what do you think of when I say the word 'fairy'?"

"Tinkerbell?" I quickly blurt out, as if this would somehow dispel the topic, at which point Miss Tōko chuckles.

"A comforting image, and one that is popular among mages who try to make familiars in the image of fairies. But unlike familiars, the true fae are not creatures brought forth through the mage's will, but actual living things of varying species. Such things may be goblins, redcaps, or the oni of our own country. Shifty creatures, the lot of them. In Scotland, there are still stories of fairies causing mischief among people...even some stories where they cause bouts of forgetfulness among people, and drawing children into forests to spirit them away for a week, replacing them with identical fetches. Though their pranks vary, all fae share one unique quality: their lack of empathy for the victims of their tricks. They are simply incapable of it. They do it because they deem it fun, not out of malevolence."

"The incident in Reien could be their handiwork, but the act of writing a letter seems to be out of their style. It indicates some kind of malice and manipulation, doesn't it? I fear, Azaka, that our culprit may be the first kind of fairy that you mentioned."

As ever, Miss Tōko never misses an opportunity to teach me more about the invisible world she seems to walk through with so much ease. And like a good student, I'm only curious for more.

"So you're saying they're familiars, being controlled by some mage?" I ask. She nods in satisfaction.

"Yes, and the kind borne from a captured creature, to be sure. The mage is probably using them to work his or her Art from afar, to do something with the memories of the students in Reien. To have this hedge wizard be so obvious in his work is almost uncharacteristically amateurish for a mage. Or perhaps he doesn't have such a complete command over his fairy familiars yet. They've always been fickle sorts, and mages generally favor other things over them. But

this rank amateur has showed his hand, and I'm thinking it will be a perfect test for you, Azaka. And so I order you as your mentor to investigate the truth behind these incidents before winter vacation ends. Find the source, and do what you can to eliminate it."

There we go. Miss Tōko finally says the words I suspected she'd been meaning to say all this time. In truth, the task scares me a bit, since I can sense her hidden implication: that I'd be going in there alone, against an individual similar to me and Miss Tōko, able to manipulate the very threads of reality with the Art. And she expects me to root him out. I try my best to hide my trepidation with a confident nod.

"Well, if it's for the sake of more arcane knowledge, then I guess I have no choice," I sigh as I answer. Miss Tōko rises from her chair to give me some documents on the details of the situation, but before she can hand me a folder, I have to voice the once concern that's been niggling at me since the moment I suspected what she would have me do. "But Miss Tōko, I can't even see the fairies. I don't have the mystic sight or Arcane Eyes like you do."

Unexpectedly, she makes the grin that has only heralded her own brand of mischief.

"Oh, don't you worry your pretty little head about that detail. I think I can cook you up something far better than a pair of eyes." Though she struggles to hold her laughter in, she doesn't tell me exactly what she meant.

## **Records in Oblivion - II**

I leave the faculty room of Reien Girl's Academy's senior high school department...unfortunately, with *her* tagging along.

"You know, I've been thinking. Maybe Tōko is actually an idiot and we just didn't notice."

January 4, Monday. Past noon. Skies partly cloudy.

Walking astride me is Miss Tōko's funny idea for something "better than a pair of eyes." The enemy.

"Having you of all people to sneak into the school with me? For once, you have my agreement."

"This sucks. I definitely got the short end of the stick this time, having to put up this act that I just transferred here on the third term."

We try to avoid looking at each other as we walk through a corridor of the senior high school building. The girl's name is Shiki Ryōgi. Like all students here, right now she's wearing the Reien uniform, a dress patterned after a black nun habit that almost always looks weird on any Japanese person. And yet Shiki wears it like an old glove. When I see her dark hair still distinctly visible even against the black fabric of the dress, and how it can't hide her slender shoulders and the pale whiteness of her nape, even I have to admit that she looks good on it; as good as any quiet Catholic girl, which of course, she is anything but. The entire thing gives me a faint feeling of disgust.

"Azaka, those two girls were just staring at us." And of course, like an idiot,

Shiki is staring right back at the upperclassmen we just passed as well. It hasn't been the first time it happened today, and after a few looks, I think I have an educated guess as to what could be so interesting to them. In an exclusive all-girls institution like Reien, the androgynous nature of Shiki's appearance must be some kind of anomaly. There are few people like Shiki in here, and her presence is bound to attract some kind of attention. The same two girls that we just passed must have only wanted to talk to her in some kind of childish attraction.

"Don't pay them any mind. You're a new face. Transfer students at this level are just rare, that's all," I caution to her. "It doesn't have anything to do with what we're investigating."

"There's a surprising number of students for the winter vacation, don't you think?"

"Ugh. It's a boarding school, obviously. A lot of these people live far away, and would rather just stay here over the break. Only the library on the first and fourth floor are actually open, but since the dormitories are well-stocked anyway, barely anyone heads to the main building. Unless you need to report to the nuns for violating some rule."

Rules which are very, very strict, and the violation of which enough times is enough reason to expel you. "Don't go outside" being the most tightly held one, and they won't make an exception even if your parents themselves showed up. Still, money has proven to change that easily enough, which I found true with my erstwhile friend, Fujino. As a man of capable capital who donated significant money to the school, Fujino's father found a way to get her out whenever she wanted. As for me... well, certainly my high grades helped, which led to my uncle being employed by Reien as a painter (which completely suited his mercenary motives for letting me go here). They were more lenient of my excursions after that.

Remove the religious veneer and Reien itself is little different from other high schools. Students still study their backs off just to pass a test to get into college, and with all the high expectations for the student body here, that fact is only doubly true. In truth, I suspect the school took me in because of my high marks, seeing me as someone they can proudly send off to Tōkyō University (which had

been my plan anyway). While the management in this place might be a bit too focused on what numbers they can boast about, it doesn't really bother me. I mean, at least they can give me the freedom to go out.

I snap out of my reverie in time to notice that we've exited the main building, and that beside me, Shiki had been staring at it with listless eyes for quite some time. Then, as if tiring of it, she looks back at me while idly fondling the cross hanging from her neck.

"Weird place. Can't rightly tell if the teachers are primarily teachers, or dedicated to being nuns, or whatever. Oh yeah, and didn't we pass by a chapel earlier? Is that where they do the whole 'mass' thing? Our Father, with art in heaven and all that?"

Oh, Shiki you ignorant fool. What would God do with art?

"There's a morning and evening service," I reply, "and a mass on Sundays. Students aren't obligated to participate, though. People like me who transferred to Reien from elementary or junior high largely aren't Christian, so we don't go. The nuns would rather we do, but... well, you know the law. The sudden influx of rich-but-not-necessarily-Christian families sending their well-to-do daughters here increased dramatically over the past decade, which, coupled with the number of parents not wanting to put their children in schools that force a Catholic education, forced them to tone down the mission school vibe."

"What a pain in the ass," Shiki sighs. "I'm willing to bet God doesn't care either way."

To see her dressed in the uniform she's wearing while wielding such a vulgar tongue makes me feel a little uneasy. I quickly dispense with the subject.

"Well, never mind God for now, but what about the fairies? See anything? Any weaving of the Art?" I ask as we continue to walk the campus grounds. Shiki shakes her head.

"Not a glance. Guess we've got no choice except to wait until tonight," she says, casting her sleepy eyes across the buildings, the abundant foliage, and the stone walkways that adorn the school.

Shiki, like many mages, can see what is hidden from most normal people. The

mystic sight of her Arcane Eyes allows her to see ghosts and spirits... and even things with more frightening implications. Her breed of sight grants her dominion over death and entropy, and it manifests for her as patterns of lines on an object, and supposedly, by tracing them she can weave entropy into it and destroy it. Apart from that, her family claims a strong martial tradition, and whatever else may be said about her, she has still lived up to it exceptionally. Because of that, her reflexes are as fast as she is efficient and brutal.

In other words: a woman quite the opposite of my brother Mikiya. Totally unsuited for him. Above all other people, it is perhaps Shiki who annoys me the most. As a matter of fact, the entire reason for me taking up Miss Tōko's tutelage in the Art is Shiki herself. Because if Mikiya's girlfriend was any normal girl, she would never measure up to someone like me. But obviously, Shiki is a far more troublesome sort. So I put aside my common sense and took Miss Tōko up on her offer.

Now, I'm still learning, but I don't feel I've measured up to her just yet, so I spend my days here in the school, balancing my time between mundane study and the practice of the Art. But even though I consider Shiki the enemy, there is one truth about her that I have so far refused to give voice to.

"I'll have to spend the night in your dormitory, I imagine. Normally, I don't like sleeping on a bed I haven't checked and prepared myself, but in this case I'll have to lower my standards." Shiki bookends the sentence with a sigh of surrender.

See, the truth is that Shiki doesn't really hate me. And I don't really hate her either. I've always thought that if only Mikiya wasn't between the both of us, I would probably be the best of friends with her.

"So where to next, Azaka?" Shiki asks as she looks at me. "To the dormitory?"

"It might be better for us to use what little time we have actually investigating and not idly resting in my room, I should think. We'll talk to class D's homeroom instructor, so just follow my lead. You're my seeing-eye dog for the duration of this case, and you'd do well to use those Eyes to scrutinize everyone you come across."

"Wasn't the homeroom instructor some guy called Hayama or somesuch?"

“Old news. Mr. Hayama left the institution in November. The homeroom instructor now is Mr. Satsuki Kurogiri, the only male instructor in the school.” I start to walk back inside, heading toward the English language teacher’s quarters, while Shiki tags along dutifully beside me.

“A guy teacher in an all-female school. I guess that must stir up some latent feelings in some of the girls, huh?”

I don’t answer her right away, but in her own crude way, she’s right. The students of Reien are brought up to be to the school’s vision of ideal young women, and men are seen as a hindrance to that growth. One of the main reasons the school strongly discourages venturing outside the grounds is because they think that a boy and a girl interacting at their age is a slippery slope to an illicit sexual relationship. But I’ve always thought that having male teachers undermined that philosophy anyway.

“Well, yes,” I finally answer after a moment’s pause. “But that topic’s practically a minefield in this place, so keep your voice down. Hideo Hayama wasn’t a popular teacher here not only because of his suspected lack of an actual teaching license, but also because there were rumors that he’d sexually harassed a student once.”

“What? Why the hell wasn’t he out of here sooner, then?” Shiki asks with cocked eyebrow.

“The sisters and the Mother Superior were forced to turn a blind eye to it because...well, let me put it this way: The surname of the school board’s chairman is Ōji, but before he married into his wife’s family, he shared a surname with Mr. Hayama.”

“Oh ho,” Shiki whispers conspiratorially. “The chairman’s estranged brother or something, I suppose. If that’s the case, then I guess the question becomes: why did he resign like he did.”

I scan my head around quickly just to check if no one’s around. Satisfied, I turn back to Shiki and say, “Remember last November when we were in Miss Tōko’s office? I said it then too, but the short of it is that a fire broke out in the high school. Only the dormitories of class C and below were affected, but the fire itself supposedly started in class D’s section, and they said Mr. Hideo

Hayama was behind it. Obviously, the chairman himself sacked him, but Mr. Hayama was already long gone by then. Perhaps he ran.”

News of the arson never really slipped outside the walls of the school. All the firemen were purportedly bribed, as were an ample number of the student’s parents and guardians. Wouldn’t want to tarnish the good name of the school where their precious daughters went to after all. It took one other toll.

There was...someone that died in that fire.

“So this Kurogiri guy—what’s he like?” Shiki asks.

“Very little to say about him, really, save for his being quite the polar opposite of Hayama. I don’t think there’s anyone in the school that hates him. He started only last summer, and unlike Mr. Hayama, he didn’t have a crutch to get him in here, though I hear the Mother Superior was quite enthusiastic to have him. From what I hear, she actually wanted to have a teaching staff that was native English —like our long gone sister school— but were able to speak Japanese. Of course, such people are rare. But Mr. Kurogiri was just such a man.”

“So he’s one of those English teachers, I take it?” Strangely enough, Shiki scowls as she asks this. Perhaps her preference for all things Japanese has given her some kind of nervous allergy towards anything English related. “Yes, but with a license to teach French and German too. He’s even studying Mandarin now, and some South American language. It’s no secret why we call him the linguistics geek. I confess, it sometimes makes him a hard person to deal with.”

I stop myself from saying anything further, seeing as we now find ourselves in front of the door to the English language teacher’s quarters. In Reien, teachers do most of the paperwork in the faculty office, but all of them are quartered in their own accommodations. This room is for the English language teacher, and is the same room that Hideo Hayama once used.

I inhale a gulp of air, careful not to let Shiki notice it. Then I rap gently on the door two times before opening it.

Once me and Shiki enter the room, we find Satsuki Kurogiri with his back to us in the far end of the room, concentrated on the work at his desk. His

workspace faces the window, from which ashen gray rays of sunlight enter from the overcast sky outside. Like any good professor, thick stacks of paper lie in heaps in seemingly random places all over the room: on top of a chair, or a cabinet, or peeking out from inside a drawer, all in some kind of order known only to him.

“Mr. Kurogiri. I’m Azaka Kokutō of class 1-A. Did the Mother Superior tell you about my business?”

“Yes,” he replies, accompanied only by a curt nod as he looks over his shoulder. He only swivels his seat around to face us. When his face meets ours, I do not fail to detect Shiki’s sharp intake of breath. It doesn’t surprise me. In fact, I expected it. I too, reacted in much the same manner of momentary confusion when I first saw him.

“Ah, Kokutō. Yes, I have been informed. Please, both of you, take a seat. I trust there will be some explaining to do.” His voice is as gentle as the smile he now wears. His age seems to be around his mid-20’s which, if true, would make him the youngest instructor in Reien. His unassuming features, coupled with his black-rimmed glasses, easily make him look among one of the least imposing ones as well. “You are here for my account on class D, I imagine.”

“Yes, sir. Specifically, your account on the students that tried to hurt each other with box cutters.” My reply makes his eyes squint, his gaze placed far beyond me, and containing, for a moment, a heavy sadness and disconsolation.

“It is regrettable that I cannot help further in that regard. I myself remember little about what actually took place. My memory is vague, but I know that I could not stop the two girls in time before they hurt themselves. I know I was there in the scene, but everything after that is unreliable, I’m afraid.” He closes his eyes.

Why is this man and he so alike? So ready to throw himself at another person’s problems when it isn’t his turn to bother himself with it? Both of them don’t seem to be the kind of person that would harm anyone else, much less not move to stop a dangerous situation as with the two students.

“Sir, did you know the reason for their quarrel?” I ask, if only to make sure, but Satsuki Kurogiri only shakes his head silently in reply.

“According to the other students, I was the one that stopped them, but I certainly don’t recall such a thing happening. I’ve been called a forgetful person many times, but this, I think, is the first time I’ve forgotten something so important. As for the reason of their argument, I honestly don’t know. It’s possible it could even have been me. I was, after all, in the same room as them when it started. Even I would think that is enough reason to investigate me.” His brooding expression darkens as he says this.

I cannot say that I wouldn’t doubt myself either if I was in his place. It would seem suspicious to anyone that he was there when the actual event happened, and yet he couldn’t do anything, and doubly so when he can’t remember even a fleeting moment. Having self-doubts would be the sensible progression from there. He doesn’t know what he did, if he were in some kind of triggered fugue state, what kind of time and memories he lost. But while suspecting yourself might be reasonable, especially with a lack of any compelling evidence to prove otherwise, worrying more and more about what happened would eat away at you, until you couldn’t escape.

“But sir, couldn’t it be possible that some students of class 1-D were still in the classroom as the entire event unfolded? Have you asked all of your students?”

“Yes, but they remain silent about it, as if they all just want to forget about it. Memory is a fickle thing, and I cannot rely on theirs just now to be entirely truthful. The question of how involved I was is still very much up in the air. Regardless, I think you will gain little more from me by asking me about it. I know I myself might seem unreliable at present, but if you have more questions left, I will be happy to answer them.” He smiles again, more weakly now, and I nod at him and answer.

“Yes, let’s continue. You said that they don’t want to talk to you about what happened. What do you think might be the reason they hesitate to confide?”

“I can’t say for sure. The class has always been particularly...strained, even on the day I took charge of them. Maybe it is not my place to say, seeing as I haven’t been their homeroom instructor for too long, but they are unusually quiet.”

“Do you think they might be scared?” As I ask that, I wonder why no other

student could have stopped the two girls from cutting each other. Could the letter have found all of the students of the class instead of just two? It could be an explanation. It makes everyone a suspect for the sender, and instantly makes them suspicious of the two girls. Perhaps they would have seen the fight as the two girls outing each other as the real sender. But Mr. Kurogiri's answer doesn't support my theory.

"No," he replies slowly, letting it churn in his mind. "Not scared I think."  
"Then what?"

"It would probably be more right to say that they are...reserved, maybe guarded. Against what, I cannot really say." I don't fail to take note of the nuance.

In other words, he might be saying that the problem has always remained internal to the classroom, never coming from, or reaching any other third party.

"Sir, can your students be contacted at present?" I feel like I have no other recourse except to be direct and ask the students. The whole affair about memories being lost makes Miss Tōko's fanciful fairy theory more likely by the second, and I'll have to ask the people spreading the rumors about that as well.

"There is no need to contact them. They are all here in campus, so you can talk to them immediately if you want to."

That genuinely catches me off guard. All of them, here in school? Is that coincidence or something else at work?

"Perhaps later. For now, though, I have another engagement. I may have more questions at a later date, though, if that will be alright. Shiki, let's go." The girl has been uncharacteristically silent for the last few minutes. I catch her attention and motion for her to follow when I stand up. It is then that I notice Mr. Kurogiri staring blankly at me and Shiki, his gaze eventually falling to Shiki in particular.

"Um, sir, is there something—" before I can finish and Mr. Kurogiri can answer, Shiki finally speaks for the first time.

"Miss Azaka refers to me by name, sir. My name is Shiki. A pleasure to make your acquaintance." A miracle. She must be channeling some effort of supreme will to even talk as gently as she does now, and I can't tell if it's dripping with

sarcasm or not. With her, you can never really tell.

“Yes, your silence made you a bit conspicuous. I am sorry,” the instructor says. “I don’t believe I’ve seen you before. A freshman, I presume?” “Perhaps. Only time will tell. I am touring the school’s facilities, you see. If I find it satisfactory, I might transfer.”

“Clearly you’ve already found the uniform satisfactory. Do consider hastily.” says Mr. Kurogiri with another curt nod. He looks at Shiki with a look of positive delight beaming on his face, noticing every detail on her like an artist would on a model.

A gentle knock on the door interrupts their conversation. Then a voice from outside, muffled by the wall.

“Excuse me.”

The door opens with a slight creaking, and in steps an upperclassman, her almond eyes looking over the room with a cold detachment, and the slight breeze drifting in through Mr. Kurogiri’s window making her back length black hair ripple slightly. Reien is already home to many fair looking women, but even here, this girl stands out. Her face is known to me. I wouldn’t forget the face of our student council president since last year. When she looks at you, she almost seems to be viewing you from above, and the long, thin eyebrows give her a countenance of stately command.

“Ah, Ōji. Is it time already?” Mr. Kurogiri says to the student, Misaya Ōji.

“Yes, it is, sir. Well past the appointed time,” she replies confidently. “You were expected in the student council room at one o’ clock. Time is not eternal, so we have to make use of it as best we can, do we not?

Without even batting an eyelash, Ōji berates the erring instructor. She carries her majesty with a grace only she can muster, and it is an asset she uses to rule the student council as tightly as she can. By the time I had transferred, she was already in place at her position, but according to what Fujino told me in the past, not even the sisters could touch her. And if the rumors are to be believed, nor can the school board chairman, with whom she shares a surname.

It’s only natural, considering the family they hail from. The chairman, who

married into the family of his wife, will obviously have a large discrepancy of influence from the Misaya Ōji, the family's second daughter. The Ōji are plutocrats; old money families with their name on a building or street or two. They have a strange practice of adopting female babies for daughters, and their marriages are arranged, taking only the best grooms into their family. Any marriage with the Ōji daughters of the family force the grooms to take the Ōji surname, while the daughters are brought up to be individuals of strong force of will to become scions to their financial empire. Such an upbringing has made Misaya Ōji a woman with a heart of iron. Still, she is not a complete tyrant. She does, in fact, possess a strong sense of justice. She shows no mercy to those who violate school regulations, but to those that uphold it, she is a sister and a role model. She is even devoutly Christian, and goes to the noon mass every Sunday without fail.

"As strict as ever, Miss Ōji. Perhaps a more flexible view of time and eternity would be wise." Grinning, the instructor stands up and leaves his seat, Misaya Ōji watching his every move with visible impatience. Surely to a woman who values discipline like her, the leisurely pace of Mr. Kurogiri must be extremely vexating.

Ōji glances for a moment in my direction, and then to Shiki, raising a doubtful eyebrow as to our identity and presence. Realizing that we're surely bothering her just by being here, I pull on Shiki's arm to signal to her that we shouldn't press our luck, and had best get out now.

"Let's move on, Shiki," I whisper as we move to the room's exit. Mr. Kurogiri opens the door for us in a manner not unlike a butler sending off some visitors, and I'm compelled to mutter a quick sorry and a bow before I step out.

"No, no," the teacher quickly says. "It is I who am sorry for not being of more help. A pleasant winter break to the both of you." He gives us a last smile goodbye.

"Do you always smile so sadly, sir?" I whip my head around just in time to see Shiki say that to Mr. Kurogiri. He only widens his eyes, not in surprise, but more of expectation, and nods.

"Hmm? But I have not once given you a smile, my dear," he says, though the

fleeting expression on his face seems to say otherwise.

After leaving the English instructor's room, me and Shiki make our way quickly toward the dormitory. We pass through the large quadrangle on the way there. Reien Girl's Academy has a campus almost as big as a university, and the layout of the buildings reflect this. The junior high school, senior high school, the gymnasium, and the dormitories are all located in separate buildings, in what seems an effort to keep the student body walking as much as possible. The distance between the school buildings and the dormitories is especially notorious, requiring you to pass through a small forest located on the grounds. Fortunately, a walkway with a roof exists so you don't get lost and can travel through it in just your indoor shoes.

After going through the quad, we find ourselves in this path toward the dormitory, each step taken by me and Shiki creating a subtle echo. I glance over at her, and recognize that she seems a bit strange...more so than usual, at any rate. Something seems to be bothering her. I think I know what it must be.

"Surprised to see Mr. Kurogiri look so alike to Mikiya?" I ask her out of the blue.

"Yeah," Shiki says, nodding meekly.

"Yet a bit handsomer than Mikiya, I'd say."

"Maybe. Can't seem to see anything wrong with him."

Ah, so we agree. When I first saw Satsuki Kurogiri, I was taken aback—much like Shiki was—at how similar he was to my brother, in both appearance, and the atmosphere that they tended to exude. His trait of accepting everything as it is seemed only stronger than Mikiya's by dint of age. To people like me and Shiki, who can't seem to help being disjointed to the people around us, meeting a person like that is always somewhat of a shock.

To look at Satsuki Kurogiri is to remind myself of the truth that I can't bear to face: that I'll never be normal like Mikiya. I can no longer remember when it was exactly that I realized this to be fact, but I know that I cried. Somewhere, buried in the forgotten memories of my earlier years, lies the scene of the

moment when I understood him; understood that as I lived under the same roof as him, I grew to love him more and more. The paradox of my existence. Brothers and sisters aren't supposed to entertain such thoughts, I know, but I regret nothing about it. If there's one thing I regret, it's my inability to remember that pivotal moment.

"Still, no matter how much he looks like him, that man is not Mikiya Kokutō, but still a man named Satsuki Kurogiri. Don't mistake one for the other," I caution to Shiki. I can tell, even as she walks beside me, that she holds the same view. But instead of nodding, she frowns and murmurs.

"It's not that they look like each other. It's more like—" Her words fade away by themselves as she stops in her tracks, looking deep into the forest that surrounds us. "Azaka, there's something inside the forest. Some kind of wooden building, maybe? What is it?"

"Oh, that. That's the old junior high school building. It hasn't been used for a long time, and it's actually going to be torn down this winter break. Why ask?"

"Gonna take a look at it. Thought I saw something. Go on ahead without me." With a rustle of the uniform robe she wears, she starts to run double time to venture into the wood.

"Shiki! Wait! You promised you wouldn't go wandering around by yourself!" I shout after her, but I realize it is futile. The brat is so willful, it'd take a miracle for me to pull her back with meager shouts.

"Azaka Kokutō?" Before I can start after her, I am stopped by someone calling my name from behind me.

*Got a new job for you, Shiki.*

In the evening of January 2, Tōko said over the telephone the words that set me up for a job that has so far been completely different from anything she's sent me before. A strange enough incident occurred in Azaka's school, Reien Girl's Academy, but the task of rooting out its source was barely enough to get me motivated at all.

I, Shiki Ryōgi, joined Tōko Aozaki's outfit some months ago purely on the promise of the possibility of murder. But this job? This is about as far as you can get from that objective without being a doctor and doing the polar opposite. It's not nearly sufficient to fill me up, let alone satisfy me. Yet even as I think that, I recognize that despite the promises of opportunities that Tōko said she would have in spades, I know that I've yet to truly kill a single person.

Oh sure, there was that one time with the girl who could bend things just by looking at them, but that didn't pan out as well as I'd hoped. At the last moment, even though the bloodlust filled me more than it ever had, I couldn't take her down. Not as she was at that particular moment. But we had a good fight. One of my best. I suppose it's a compromise I'll have to live with.

The past few weeks held little opportunity for any similar excursions, however, so a hungry dissatisfaction had its grip on me. Surely it must have been the cause for me accepting such a dreary job as the one I'm in now. Besides, I had nothing better to do anyway. As I see it, there's little difference in sleeping in my room out of boredom, or going to Reien Girl's Academy and sleeping in Azaka's

dormitory out of boredom. At least in the latter, there are more opportunities to get out and move. And so I'm here, in this stuffy girl's boarding school, posing as a touring prospective transfer student intending to go in on the third term, and trying to find fairies that Azaka can't see.

As I pass the tree line, I slow my pace down to a brisk step, and when I realize Azaka doesn't seem to be tagging along, I walk. Deeper into the foliage lies the wooden school building I'm heading for, just visible within the shroud of green and brown that obscures my vision in all directions. Whether because of the cloudy skies or some other, unseen influence, the sunlight peeking through the treetops is a shade of gray more akin to mist.

The distance between the buildings of Reien Girl's Academy is so unnecessarily vast that time and neglect has allowed the foliage to grow largely unchecked except among the most travelled paths. The majority of the campus is filled with a vast, sprawling forest. Forget having a forest inside the school, try saying that there's a school somewhere in the forest.

The soil is damp with leaf mold that clings to my boots, and it fills the area with a familiar fragrance, the color and air of bittersweet ripened fruit. And as it unites with the noise of the insects on the leaves, I am almost intoxicated by it. Time seems to take its leisurely pace here, and there is a comforting familiarity to it all, creating the deceptive illusion of being apart from the world. I remember then the mage who made a building a reality all his own, and the old memory of the Ryōgi estate, walled off from greater society. Both of them, I realize, are places isolated from the normalcy of the world. So it is with this school.

Soon, I reach the building, which I now see is in the center of a clearing of long cut-down trees. The design of the building itself is old-fashioned, even without recognizing its wooden make, and it sits breathless at the center of the trees like a creature asleep, or a man on his deathbed waiting for the end to come. The ground in the clearing is overrun with grass weeds, and my steps are muffled and silent when I set foot on them. Treading across them as fast as I comfortably can without breaking the silence of the place, I enter the building.

Inside, I discover it isn't as run down as its façade would have me believe. I get the feeling that the structure is smaller than it looked somehow, possibly because Azaka said this was the former junior high school building. Every

footfall on the wooden floor gives an audible creak. The noise echoes across the desolate hallway, growing more indistinguishable the farther it travels, and blending with the noise of the insects outside, still audible even in such a dead space.

As I walk further inside, my thoughts turn to the teacher Azaka introduced me to earlier. Satsuki Kurogiri. Azaka said he looked very much like Mikiya, and she's right. But that isn't truly special. A lot of people look alike, after all. But when the atmosphere he gives off is similar as well, it becomes truly unsettling. But there I feel some fundamental difference between them, some clear distinction that's on the tip of my tongue, though I can't rightly place it just yet. It's a particular feeling I've been having lately. Of not knowing, but feeling. It's a very human thing.

When I first stole back into consciousness half a year ago, I was still gripped by that inexplicable feeling of simultaneously knowing and not knowing, of experiencing something and getting an emotion of newness and familiarity at the same time. But the past months have borne new experiences, experiences that not even the old *Shiki* could have ever known about. Now, more than ever, I can feel how truly distinct the *Shiki* before the accident and myself after the recovery really are, though it is still a faint boundary. Slowly, the hollow in my soul that Tōko once told me of is being filled with new memories, trivial realities, and little emotions. There still lingers that old lack of a sensation of life, but the emptiness I had when I first woke up is well and truly gone. Someday maybe, when the day comes that this hollow soul is really filled, I can even begin to grasp that faint dream of being normal.

“Our little dream, isn’t it, **Shiki**?” I whisper to myself. Inside, I know there will be no answer.

“A fool’s dream, I would think.” Yet from somewhere unseen, someone answers.

The voice is little else but a low murmur, but it echoes down the hallway until it becomes a sound that blends with the cacophony of insects. And then for a moment, behind my neck, something pricks me. “Goddamit.” The light touch brings me back from my distant thoughts. Quickly, I move my hand to the nape of my neck, and I’m certain I’m holding...something. It almost feels like the

shape of a model figure of a man, only slightly larger than my hand. Without a second thought, I hold tightly and crush it. It makes a conspicuous high keening sound. I draw my hand back and look at the palm of my hand.

Only a strange white liquid is left. With my palm spread, the thick, sticky liquid drips down to the floor. Is this the only thing left of the thing I crushed? Then I remember what Tōko and Azaka said about the fairies. I never saw anything of the sort in my entire time here, and I can't tell if this crap in my hand is something related or not.

“Ew,” I remark as I whisk my hand to clear the substance away. Strangely enough, despite its almost adhesive quality before, it slips off of my skin quite easily now. It takes me a moment to notice that while I was studying the liquid, the entire place had become deathly quiet. Even the keening sound of the insects had disappeared. If they were even insects. If what I destroyed was truly a fairy or something like it, there couldn’t have been just one of them. Something so easily destroyed would serve little use for a mage. There must be a swarm. And the buzzing noise might have been them, their master deciding a hasty retreat after having observed my overenthusiastic destruction of their comrade.

In any case, I don’t think there’s anything left for me to find in this building. Going back through the trees the way I came, I make my way back to the walkway in the middle of the forest, where I had left Azaka, and soon enough I catch sight of her again.

Azaka stands only a little shorter than me, with hair that reaches the middle of her back. If the girl Ōji, who we had met earlier, carried herself with the air of a castle’s queen, Azaka carries herself much like a princess. Well, a princess of stubbornness if nothing else. I exit the tree line and approach beside her, whereupon she finally notices me.

“Huh? Decided against it, Shiki?” she asks, perplexed somehow. “Decided against what?”

“Going there, idiot.” She motions her head to where I just came from, toward the old building in the woods. We share an expression of bewilderment with each other for a while until I finally realize what happened. “Azaka,” I ask, “do you know what time it is?”

“It should be around 2pm, righ—” her words cut off. I know why. It’s already around 3 o’ clock.

“I didn’t expect you to stand around waiting for me for an hour. If you remember what happened in that hour, we’ve got no problems, but...” I trail off. Silently, Azaka begins to tremble, putting a finger on her lips as if just now figuring it out. She doesn’t even attempt to hide her surprise as she stares into space.

But I can already tell that as far as she knows, she can’t remember a thing from the time she called out to me to the time I got back.

“Shiki, it couldn’t be that I—” her words come out in fits and starts as she trembles from head to toe, not out of fear, I start to recognize, but more out of pure anger. She can’t seem to stand the thought of someone having done something to her without her even knowing.

“I don’t know if I even need to say it,” I start, giving voice to what she’s so far refused to say, “but the fairies got you. Took the memory away too, probably.”

As soon as I say it, her face turns beet red. Her realization of her own carelessness at being snuck up on like a novice mage and her embarrassment is probably making her hard to decide between being ashamed or being angry. Most of the time, Azaka is very calm and collected, but she doesn’t like people to know that she can pop a fuse just like anybody else, very unlike the image she’s worked so hard to cultivate.

Azaka clears her throat before she speaks. “We’ll go back to the dormitory. It seems we need to plan strategies of our own.” Her voice has gained an irritated streak, and her walk is brisk and determined. As I look on her, back turned to me, I wonder what she’d say if I said I actually admired her in times like these? “Shiki, are you coming or what?” she says, almost to the point of shouting.

Well, guess I’ve got no time to think about it. I follow her quickly, going along with her antics like I promised to.

## / 2

After returning to the dormitory and subsequently talking to some of the students in class D, it had already grown dark outside. Though the school is on winter break, it apparently doesn't stop the rules from being in effect, so we had to go back to Azaka's room.

After 6 in the evening, students are forbidden to go anywhere except the portions of the dormitory reserved for their class, except to go the bathroom, or to go to or from the study hall located on the first floor. The students who transferred here in high school who don't know better sometimes sneak out to go to their friends' room in other parts of the dormitory, and for that purpose some of the sisters keep a corridor watch in the night. The students who've been here since junior high are already used to it, and so either they don't go out, or if they do, they already know the route that the nuns keep so well, and so are never seen.

Or at least, that's what Azaka has just politely told me. Since the entire thing is really of little concern to me, all I can do is sit in her room and grumble. Azaka is sitting in her own chair. The room we're in is narrow but long, and first years get to share the room with another girl. Luckily for me, Azaka's roommate went home for the winter. There are two study desks in the room, attached to the wall, and a bunk bed for the both of us. Personal effects go in the bookshelves and cabinets beside the wall. The room itself is obviously as old as the building it's in, but it's the kind of antiquity where you can feel the comforting weight of a placid history on it.

Azaka is already in her pajamas, having changed immediately out of her uniform robes the minute we got back to her room. I wanted to change out of this

stuffy nun uniform as well, but I didn't bring any change of clothes, so it looks like I'm stuck with all the robes Azaka's got. Having little else to do, I sit down on the bed and listen to Azaka's explanation.

"Seeing as we can't go out of our rooms tonight," she continues, "we'll have to call it a day. Normally, we'd wake up at five o' clock for morning service, but since it's winter break, we can sleep in until six. Remember, Shiki, that none of the other students or sisters know we're investigating the incident in class D, so please try to refrain from being too weird and bring attention on ourselves. Unlike you, I'm actually staying here for a second year, so please try not to make a big fuss that will mess up my reputation."

All of which I heard almost word for word the night before as well. I honestly have no idea why she even needs to worry. In some kind of inverse relationship, I'm so bored here that it makes me not want to do anything.

"Relax. I'm just here to be your eyes, so I didn't bring my favorite knife with me. I don't have a grudge against whoever this fairy mage is, so I don't have any special urge to take care of him. I'm more worried about your temper running wild and chasing after this guy."

"A misplaced fear, as well. I know our objective is only to identify the source of the phenomenon, not eliminate it. Investigate, and then pass the matter on to Miss Tōko, and have her take care of it."

So she says with her signature voice of calm, but the familiar fire in her eyes hasn't died down since this afternoon. She's taking that fairy incident really personal. And when that happens, I know she sees little option except to strike back.

"Well, see if you can keep your attitude that way, Azaka," I say offhandedly, which prompts Azaka to direct her stare at me.

"Could it be that you're making a fool out of me, Shiki?"

"Like you said: a misplaced fear." Her accusatory glance is so alike to how Mikiya looks at me in mock suspicion (which is more than uncommon) that it makes me inadvertently laugh. This only has the effect of worsening Azaka's mood.

“Ugh, fine. I swear that I won’t get mad, so you don’t have any right to judge me. Now to get back to more important matters,” she says as she changes the tone of her voice. “Among the people we met today, was there anyone you thought was strange in any way?”

“Strange? Well, all of them, to be honest. All of the people from class D that we met had some of the stuff somewhere in their neck.”

“By ‘stuff,’ I assume you mean the same blood that came from the fairy you supposedly killed.” Her brows come together in a frown, as she must think that I’m the worst person alive for crushing a perfectly good (and more importantly for her, studyable) familiar. Still, it’s the truth, so I can’t argue with her on that.

“It’s not blood, I think. More like the scales on butterfly wings. I doubt they wouldn’t notice it if it was just some kind of liquid. It was in that teacher we met earlier, too. Kurogiri, right? I didn’t know what it was when we met him, but now that I think about it, it’s the same thing.”

“I see. Say, Shiki, whoever’s responsible for this, why do you think he’s taking away the memories?”

“Wouldn’t know. I don’t have any reason to do it.”

“I don’t even know why I even bothered asking you,” Azaka says with a huff. Then, ignoring me, she starts to enumerate the facts we have at hand in as low a voice as she can muster. “In December, members of class D got a letter, containing secrets that even the person who knew them forgot about. At around the same time, rumors of fairies in the campus started to spread, sneaking up on you while you were asleep and stealing your memories. Just before winter break started, two students from class D argued and then attempted to harm each other with box cutters, the cause of their quarrel being the letters they received. The other students didn’t even try to stop the fight. Even up to January, the students refuse to talk about the incident, and the atmosphere remains very strained and unhelpful.”

She grants me a sideways glance with dagger eyes for a moment, and then goes back to her reverie. “Well, *she* actually encountered at least one of the fairies, and I lost an entire hour to the creatures. What was I doing? I could have been doing all sorts of things in that lost hour.”

So even the calm and composed Azaka Kokutō is bothered about memories forgotten.

So what of me?

My memories of what happened three years ago, during my freshman year of high school, still contain many blanks. The ambiguity of their nature still creates a great unease in me, filling my imagination with all kinds of doubts, all kinds of explanations, none of them painting me in the best light. That same year, the city seemed to have been frozen in place from the violent murders committed by an unknown serial killer. The gap in my memories almost makes me feel like...I'm connected to those incidents in some way. But if anyone would know, it would be **Shiki**, my other self. But now he's gone, and whatever elucidating information he may have had is gone along with him.

Wait—*wait a minute*. Why haven't I thought of it before? If the holes in my memory is due to **Shiki** dying...then why are my memories relating to the moments directly before my accident also gone? Surely it wasn't **Shiki** in control then, but *Shiki*. Maybe—maybe if this fae mage has a way of stealing memory, then could he have a way to give lost memory back? In any case, it would be difficult to get the idea past Azaka. And even discounting whether or not Azaka believes in them, the existence of fairies here isn't something I particularly approve of.

Whatever the situation evolves into, we still need to find the man responsible. And whatever fact me and Azaka are missing to tie everything together is so close that I can almost feel it through the walls, bleeding through the serenity in this enclosed space of madness.

"Azaka, have you given a thought as to how we're even going to begin to investigate lost memories?"

"I know, I know. It's not like we can hypnotize people and dig into their subconscious or something. Do you know anything about the four processes of memory, Shiki?"

"Encoding, storage, retrieval, and recognition, right? Same as any VCR. Recorded video sticks to the tape and encoded and stored. When you watch it again, you put it in the box and it retrieves the video. You verify if it's still the

same video as before with recognition. If one of the processes fail, there's some kind of a memory disorder.”

“Indeed. Even if someone forgets something, the memory itself is still stored in the brain. Anything the brain encodes stays there. This isn’t some kind of weird mass hysteria. These so-called fairies are extracting these memories, but to what purpose, it isn’t clear.”

Before I left, Tōko confided in me that she suspected that there was some cold intent behind all of this, but I can’t say I entirely agree. Seeing as the memories being stolen are memories the persons themselves have already forgotten, the person wouldn’t even notice if they were taken away. In fact, the whole thing with the letters seems almost a benevolent act, as if whoever was sending them was informing the person that he or she had forgotten *this* particular memory, and that they shouldn’t forget it ever again.

“It’s possible the culprit is looking for something in all the memories. Some information, some kind of proof that he needs,” I suggest. Azaka acknowledges me with a slight nod and leans back on her seat.

“Or just someone that really likes to tell people about the skeletons in their closet and point them out for everyone to see.”

“If anything, it’s not something so benign. Harassment, at the very least. Like a kid, this one,” I add. Well, fairies are already like children in their fickleness anyway, so why do I even wonder? I try to stop myself from thinking any more on this. After all, I’m just Azaka’s eyes right now, and it’s her job to take the arcane knowledge and derive some kind of an answer to all of it, not mine. And with that thought, I move from sitting down on the bed to lying down on it spread eagled.

“Tell me something, Shiki,” Azaka suddenly blurts out, seemingly embarrassed as she sits lazily in her chair. “How is it that you see the fairies?”

Man, she’s still beating herself up over that? “Don’t really know how I do it. Even I don’t know how the mystic sight works. All I know is that you don’t have it. But if you want to try and sense them, what you could do is improvise on the spells you can do, and the kind of Art you can control: find the moving currents in the air that you feel are warmer. If your senses are right, then you can catch

them.”

“Warm pockets of air, huh?” She nods and puts a hand on her chin as she thinks. It might sound like a load of bullshit, but I didn’t lie to her. If the fairies are alive, then they must give off heat, and that’s where Azaka excels. All she needs to do is find the small nooks warmer than others as soon as she knows that fairies are about. That would be the fairies trying to maneuver in the space around her.

In any case, we conclude our planning after that. In a stroke of unexpected generosity, Azaka lends me one of her pajamas, just a bit larger than what I’m used to, and I take the top bunk and go to sleep.

## **Records in Oblivion - III**

January 5, Tuesday.

Shiki refused to wake up despite me spending the better part of thirty minutes trying my best efforts to do so. Either she's an amazingly sound sleeper, or is actually awake and just lazy. Either way, I gave up on her, and at just past seven o' clock, I decided to just head to the study hall on the first floor by myself.

Normally, the study hall is populated by the same students (of which I am one of their number, of course) occupying the same spaces, dutifully studying for exams, but the break has cleared the room of most of its usual semi-residents. What the hall was built for and what most students actually use it for can be wildly different at times: at the same time that studious individuals are perusing books, others are conversing behind shelves, keeping a constant lookout for the patrolling sister Einbach, lest she unleash the customary disciplinary lectures when she discovers students misbehaving. The ease of using the shelves as concealment isn't lost on me, and so I know that over the break it becomes one of the best places for any sort of clandestine meeting, especially so in mornings like these, when it sees little activity, and even less so on breaks.

Seeking to exploit that fact, I arranged a meeting with class D's president here. Yesterday, when me and Shiki asked a few questions to a few of the students from the class, they were fairly uncooperative, and all of them spouted the same suspiciously similar lines. We couldn't get anything of value out of them. Well, it's not as if I expected them to open up to people they perceive to be outsiders like us. So I saw little choice except to be a bit more direct, and I saw the best option for that was to make our position clear and talk to the class president, one

Fumio Konno.

All seems as expected when I finally arrive at the study hall, with no one in sight. No stove for heating can be found here, because the hall is too large, and so entering the hall, I am caught off guard by the winter chill running through the spacious room, colder than it is anywhere else in the building.

“Kokutō, over here,” says a cool voice from deeper inside the hall. It is only a whisper, but the loneliness of the hall seems almost to amplify it. I can see rows upon rows of shelves inside, and between two of them, I can see Fumio Konno leaning out her head, waiting for me. Quickly, I close the door and head further inside.

I share only one thing in common with Fumio Konno: the fact that we transferred into Reien Girl’s Academy’s high school in the same year. Other than that, we couldn’t be further apart. Her height easily surpasses five and a half feet, marking her as one of the tallest in the school, while my height is quite average. Where she is forceful and exuberant, I am composed. Where her hair is cut quite short, mine is grown out long. She looks almost an adult, and could probably pass herself off as a college student at least, and she herself acknowledges that she doesn’t truly act like the kind of girl that Reien tries to engender.

“I’m quite sorry for having to meet you so early in the morning,” I say to Konno as I near the shelves she’s hiding between. I bow to her to acknowledge that this is the first time we’ve met, but she is evidently surprised by this courtesy enough to cross her arms as she draws a nervous breath, averting her eyes from me in the short moments it takes me to bow.

“Er, forget about it. I can’t sleep easy with the girls in my class anyway. Keeping myself occupied through other things seems like the right thing to do at this point. So, what was it that was so important for you to talk about? Is it about Hayama?”

Well, that was certainly straightforward, and it catches me off guard. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, yeah,” she says with a snicker. “I sort of heard you were asking around with the people in my class yesterday, and some looker no one recognized was tagging along with you. Besides, what else would be so important to the

president of class A to ask me about personally?” She ends with a slightly suspicious glance at my direction.

As I’d feared, word of our activities is spreading faster than anticipated. I glance back at Konno, trying to dispel her little fear. “I never really thought much of Mr. Hayama at first, but I suppose that was a mistake on my part. I’ll be frank with you Ms. Konno. I’ve been tasked by the Mother Superior to investigate the incident that happened in class D. I need you to tell me if you know anything.” Unexpectedly, the tall girl’s face darkens at my inquiry.

“Straight from the Mother Superior, huh? I guess honors students are different. And they just told me to keep forgetting about the incident and focus on studying. Wow.”

“*Keep forgetting. So that means—*”

“Pretty much. I’m in the same boat as Mr. Kurogiri. I was at the scene, unable to do anything. Then, nothing, Beyond knowing that the thing happened, I can’t remember anything. Then, I remember Kashima and Ruridō being transported to the infirmary somehow. I tried to visit them in the infirmary, but the Mother Superior forbade it when she was interviewing them.” Sweat starts to glisten from her forehead, and she seems almost embarrassed to even be speaking at all. That only goads me to press further and ask.

“I have a wild theory here but—did you get a letter too?”

“Oh, that. It wasn’t as creepy as the kind the other two got. It was pretty benign, comparatively. A lot of us got it every day, including Kashima and Ruridō. That’s got to drive you up the wall, doesn’t it? Mine just had stuff about walking home together with an old junior high crush, or my pet cat that died a long time ago. At first, I thought it was pretty useless. But then I almost started to like the letters. They made me remember things I almost forgot about. That whoever was sending them still knew about it was kind of scary and all, but to be honest, it didn’t seem to register all that much with me.”

“Did you ever feel guilty about what he was sending you?”

“I dunno. Maybe I did, and I just didn’t know what to call it.”

“This might be a long shot but, do you know who sent the letters, or know

anyone who would?”

“No one I know. But this is hardly a normal situation anymore is it? If we’re assuming that things like ghosts or fairies exist, then surely there must be some...thing that knows.”

She fails to specify what she thinks, however, so I try to change tack. “So personally, what do you think about what happened, Miss Konno?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore. It’s weird, that’s for sure, but my class has always been weird from the start. Maybe it’s some kind of karmic thing, y’know? Maybe you don’t know about class D, Kokutō, but they’re all actually high school transferees. A lot of the parents think they’re problem children, so they dump them here. Me included.”

Even I know about Fumio Konno’s reason for being here. She was a star basketball player in her high school once, but her dad wanted her only daughter to follow in the family enterprise. When she rebelled, her father put her into Reien by force to discipline her, and that was the end of that. I didn’t realize it’s a fate she shares with the rest of her class.

“What can you tell me about Mr. Hayama setting fire to the dormitory?” I ask. This is the most important card I can play. The sisters forbade us from talking about it on pain of expulsion, and it shut the girls up quite effectively. Hopefully, the trust Fumio Konno shows in me can lead to something fresh.

Her face turns bitter and she looks away as I ask the question. “I have no idea what he was thinking, burning the dormitory down. Hideo Hayama was unhinged. Behind the closed doors of our class he was fond of going on and on, complaining about why his brother didn’t let him just—” a pause, and a gulp “—fuck the Mother Superior. I dunno. Maybe you don’t believe me. But as far as I’m concerned, he had no business being an instructor.” Her voice starts to break, becoming halting. “And Kaori even died because of him! All because his brother took pity on him and gave the jobless fool a responsibility! Our class...we didn’t have anything to do with it. We weren’t responsible!”

She spits out the words louder than she probably should have, and they echo across the empty study hall, giving me a moment of alarm before I remember that the hall is empty. I peek my head out of the shelves just to make sure, and

quickly return to Fumio Konno, only a few moments ago looking cheerful and confident, now reduced to hiding her face from me, obviously holding back her sobs. I'd try to press further about what she means with her eerie last statement, but I realize I can't get anything more out of her at this state, not now at least.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Konno," I stammer awkwardly. "I really am. If it's any consolation, you've been very helpful. Let's leave it at that for now. Do you need help getting back?"

"No," she quickly says, her voice muffled by a hand over her mouth. "Just leave me here for a while."

I turn my back on her hesitantly and start to walk out of the shelves worriedly. Just before I turn the corner however, I try to ask her one last question.

"Do you believe in the fairies?" I almost regret the throwaway manner with which I state it, but Konno looks up at me with a measure of surprise in her eyes.

"I don't, but that doesn't mean they don't exist, right? I mean, how else can you explain the memories being like they are in our class?"

I sigh in agreement, and leaving her, I make a beeline straight out of the study hall.

After parting with Fumio Konno, I try to socialize with the few members of class D I happen to run into in the halls, but the responses are expectedly the same as before. In fact, there are much less of them wandering the halls now, as if they've started to hide themselves in their rooms to reduce their contact with the outside world as much as possible, like they were waiting for something. The few class D students I encounter all shared the same desire of wanting to go home, whispered in tones of cold disappointment. When I asked them why they don't, in fact, go home, they only give me a very confused look.

I already knew I couldn't get a proper conversation out of anyone except Fumio Konno, being the class president weighted with responsibilities that she needed to get off her chest. The only thing I can gather is that all of them certainly believe in the rumors of fairies sweeping away the memories. Everyone did indeed receive the mysterious letters, and like Mr. Kurogiri, everyone had

gaps in their memories.

The conclusion I can derive is that all of the girls of class D are hiding something. What that may be, I can't say, but it's almost certain that Hideo Hayama was embroiled in the very center of it.

With few other options, I make my way to the faculty room. Hideo Hayama might have left the school in November after the fire, but I'm hoping there might still be something in his files I can uncover.

"Excuse me," I whisper to no one in particular as I open the door to the empty faculty room. I know it's empty at this time since the instructors rarely use it except for the morning meeting they have, and the office's custodian is out on vacation as well. "Thank you, Lord," I whisper with a smile on my face, half in my luck, and half in actual benediction.

It doesn't take me long to find the file on November last year, and I take my time poring over its contents. I hardly realize that an hour has passed while I'm flipping over files and opening folders in the unlit room, my sight only helped by the sunlight peeking through the windows. Despite my best hopes though, I can't find anything of great importance to my investigation.

"Darn. Looks like I'll really have to use Shiki and search every nook and cranny of this school for a clue." I don't really want to have her follow me around like some kind of obedient Doberman, but it seems I have little choice. With nothing else to do, I close the file, now a bit messier than when I opened it. But one of the papers catches my eye.

"Hideo Hayama, employed since 1989, employment termination at December 1998." At first glance, it seems typical enough. But a cursory inspection reveals some very strange details. December 1998? That seems impossible when the fire happened in the beginning of November, and they haven't heard a word or seen nary a peek from Hideo Hayama since. But according to this he was employed until December. And below that, the reason for termination is listed as "no known permanent address." Does that mean he's missing?

The thoughts roil in my mind as I return the file where I found it and quickly slip out of the faculty room and back into the corridor...

...only to meet the person I least expected—nor least desired—to meet. “Oh, Miss Kokutō. What business do you have in the faculty room so early, pray tell?”

“G—good morning, Mr. Kurogiri.” I give a quick bow. “It’s already noon, though.” I try to dodge the question at the same time as I try to dodge past him without seeming in too much of a hurry. Yesterday, with Shiki beside me, I allowed myself to feel at least a bit less disquieted by him as I do regularly, but alone, the unease returns. My chest tightens, and my heart races. I can’t tell anymore whether the unease comes from the fact that he looks so like Mikiya, or it’s simply the nervously calm air with which he carries himself. “Were you retrieving something from the faculty room?”

Despite my careless question, he answers. “Ah, yes. Something the Mother Superior asked me to do. A list of the students’ names, rendered in French. She needs to send it to the sister institution in France.”

“I see. Our names, is it?” I stammer clumsily. I try to slip past him to end the conversation there.

“Indeed. You are not entirely unrelated to the matter either. The short list for exchange student candidates for our French sister school includes you and Ōji.”

That stops me in my tracks before I manage to make my way past him. This is the first time I’ve heard of this. I take a moment to relish that fact before continuing my steps. But I stop again when I pass him to ask him the question I’ve asked the students, but haven’t yet asked him.

“Mr. Kurogiri, are you aware of the rumor circling amongst the students these days?”

“The fae, correct? Yes, I’ve heard of them.”

“Do you believe it, sir? Oh, but of course I don’t believe in them myself,” I quickly add. Unexpectedly, he smiles a lazy smile.

“I think I understand your confusion. Stories of the fae aren’t as numerous here in Japan as they are in my country, are they? I think I find I have an affinity for the old Scottish tales of the cait sith, the cu sith, and other fantastical creatures.”

I’m surprised for a few moments at his response, and it takes me some precious

few moments more to remember that Mr. Kurogiri was, in fact, a foreigner. The university he studied in might have had something as esoteric as folkloristics, so my question might not have seemed so childish as I had originally assumed.

“If I remember correctly, the cait sith is the cat that wears long boots.” “Oho, so you know. Still, talking cats find some commonality in some Japanese folk tales as well, so it’s not something so original.”

Hah, well at least he knows where to sniff out actual intelligence when it’s present. “So do the myths seem more real in your country, sir? Or are they still another misunderstanding of folk practices or natural phenomena?”

“I haven’t heard much in the way of such things recently, but there is always the odd story of children being spirited away and replaced. More and more I find the breed of stories of farmers being helped out by the Good Folk diminishing dramatically.” He clears his throat before continuing. “Those old legends of the selkie fairies—of brownies and knockers, for example—are really just one way of exaggerating the acts of men who, for one reason or another, find themselves cast out of every village they visit. Left with little recourse except to live a hermit’s life, they briefly appear to lend a welcome hand in menial tasks such as the harvesting of crops, through which they hope to build a friendly relationship.””

“That sounds like a very noble way to live a life,” I remark.

“Yes, but on the other hand, you have the tales of kidnapped children, where the stories of changelings come from. Some legends are about gentry kidnapping certain children they believe to be of some random stock blessed by God. Their desire for these children leads them to swap the child.”

“What happens to the kidnapped child?” As soon as I say the question, Mr. Kurogiri reacts with a wide grin.

“Ah, do not fret so much on it. They usually turned out the way they were before. You see, since it was gentry that took them, it was usually easy to find the child in the baptismal records of a church. Any man, nobilis or no, had their child baptized lest the child suffer in society through persecution. So a trip to the church usually satisfied the altercation quite legally.” I sigh, and almost smile, until he continues.

“But then there are the cases where this is not true, where no other sensible explanation is true. There are the children actually whisked away by the fae, the ones they called changelings.”

“So you do believe in them, sir?”

“Yes,” he says without hesitation, “I think they exist. But it doesn’t mean I have to like them. The pranks they pull sometimes go much, much too far. The changelings are one example. They would kidnap a child, sometimes keeping it for many years, and then return it inexplicably on its parent’s doorstep. Then its parents would find their joy quickly curtailed when the child rapidly grows ill, its very essence misaligned, only to die a slow, lonely death, hated by its parents and lost to the world.”

I almost bring a hand to my mouth. This was certainly not the kinds of fairy tales I had grown up hearing.

“Oh, I am sorry,” the instructor quickly says. “It seems I have spoken overmuch yet again.”

“N—no,” I utter meekly. “I enjoyed it quite well, sir. If you’ll excuse me, however...” I let the sentence hang unfinished, give a curt bow, and hurry away with uneasy but quickened steps, as far away from Mr. Kurogiri as my feet will reasonably carry me.

Noon passes, and more out of a combined desire to get away from Mr. Kurogiri and simultaneously avoid Shiki more than anything else, I decide to head to the burned down dormitory in the eastern end of the campus. I’m not particularly certain I’ll glean anything of actual importance there, but I feel like I should visit the place that Hideo Hayama tried to burn down at least once, seeing as my investigation seems to be heading closer and closer to that direction.

When I stand before the dormitory, I see its perimeter surrounded by ropes, a “No Entry” sign in place to discourage any casual would-be intruders. Obviously, it’s not enough to deter me. I walk over the ropes and toward the imposing structure. Most of it is a burned down hulk, the rooms formerly lined up on its east wing completely gutted, as though a giant monster clawed it down from roof to foundation. What little partitions remain that were once the walls

and floors of its rooms are crumbling and blackened wood and concrete. In contrast, immediately westward of that sight is the building's west wing, the corridor leading out of the rooms and everything west of it surviving largely intact.

Walking through the corridor, you'd never notice that immediately to the east, beyond doors that remain closed, a fire had taken the other half. Open the doors, however, and you see only the campus and the verdant trees beyond, like a bad piece of installation art. Maybe it's better to have the doors remain closed, as respect to the last bitter taste of normalcy this building still has.

Though his name bounces around in my mind more and more these days, I've only really seen Hideo Hayama the one time. He was teaching in classes C through E, so he never had any reason to come to class A. The one time I saw him was during a morning service, looking bored and flipping absentmindedly through the pages of a Bible. I took him to be at least thirty years old, and his face plain and unassuming.

"How am I supposed to look into him when I don't even know the first thing about the man?" Now I'm talking to myself, which is probably a sign that there's little left for me here and that I should leave. I descend from the second floor back to the first using the lonely, barely lit stairwell, making my way to the still-intact exit.

Only to find a familiar figure blocking the exit, shadowed by the afternoon sun. Though her features are obscured, it's easy enough to figure out. There is little else in Reien with black hair as fine, and features as delicate as Misaya Ōji, the secret power behind the academy. She walks towards me wordlessly, and something makes me feel I should hold my tongue until she has her chance to speak. She stops when she is only two meters in front of me. She looks me straight in the face, and grants me a gentle smile.

"So tell me, Miss Kokutō. Has there been progress in your efforts?" Misaya Ōji says to me. As soon as she says that, the temperature seems almost to drop a few precious degrees, though I can't say for certain why, or even if it's real. But it's enough to put me on guard. Her voice is familiar, more so than the level that I associate with the many snippets of conversation that I have heard through her in the past months, but on a more recent level. Somehow, a memory of a noise,

of an echoing chorus like the buzzing of flies, comes to mind. Memory turns to reality, and I am certain the noise swelling to some kind of low crescendo that I hear right now is similar.

The fact falls into place, and I realize belatedly that this will be a repeat of what happened to me yesterday. My memories will be stolen again, and I will stand here dazed and confused for god knows how long this time. I don't have my glove handy right now for a quick spell, but there is little choice. The flame calls, and perhaps it is not yet too late. I focus on Misaya Ōji in front of me, and then weave my Art, feeling the pattern around me and sensing hot currents in the air like Shiki told me to.

I can feel the spell working, and I close my eyes almost reflexively, trusting the Art to tell me of any unnatural pockets of heat in the air. And then—

“—Gotcha!” Something warm tried to draw near my chest, but I catch it with my bare hands before it can hit me. I've definitely caught *something* with my hand, and it's making a frantic, keening noise. I ignore it for now and open my eyes, keeping my gaze locked and level with Misaya Ōji. “Well, well,” she says, as if she had expected the entire thing. “You told me that you've never seen the fae in your life, but here you are swatting one away?”

Her tone is enough to assure me, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that she is the enemy I've been looking for.

“I see. So my one hour blank yesterday was me talking to you.”

“Yes, and you have made things so much easier for me. My children have made it simple for me to know what sort of person you truly are, Miss Kokutō.” She raises a hand to brush something unseen on her shoulder, and I hear the same familiar keening sound in response. Another fairy? No. If I wove my spell right, then there is a minutely abnormal amount of heat all around her, a rough estimate numbering in fifty such sources. And though I don't truly see the fairies, I am almost overwhelmed by the truly impressive amount of potential she can bring to bear.

“Your composure is admirable, Miss Kokutō. It almost seems as if you're not even surprised, though I know it is a simple lie. However, I was surprised at

what I learned about you. To think that there would be someone in the academy that studied the Art besides myself.”

“You don’t surprise me, Miss Ōji. I’ve known from the beginning that there was a mage here with fairy familiars. But you; you waited for me to be alone didn’t you? To be vulnerable, and then eliminate me? Commendable strategy, but it seems a mistake to me to reveal yourself.”

I try to stall for time, scanning the area around me for alternative exits. I remind myself that my part here is only reconnaissance, not a fight. While I’d gladly take a fistfight any day of the week, even I don’t desire a duel to the death between mages such as us.

“Perish the thought. I never thought to remove you, Miss Kokutō. Why would I, when you are one of the few of my breed of person? Understanding each other would be better than to put a blade at each other’s throats in this situation, yes?”

“Says the person who tried to set her fairy familiars on me.”

“Oh I only tried to learn more about you, my dear. Very useful, if we are to have any sort of meaningful conversation and avoid meaningless deaths,” she says with a deathly calm voice. Is she actually serious? I glance for a moment at the corridor that stretches behind me—my only means of escape—and try to stall her to until she reveals some point where I can retreat in relative safety.

“Talk? With me?”

“Why of course! You visited this desolate place, Miss Kokutō, and that is enough to endear you to me. For this place is—”

“—the place where Kaori Tachibana lost her life, isn’t it?” Ōji nods, satisfied. Her eyes, however, still betray a merciless and spiteful mien, cold as winter. “The one student in November’s unfortunate fire that somehow couldn’t get away. You knew her, Miss Ōji?” Another graceful nod at my question.

“I valued Kaori very dearly, like I would a little sister. She took in hardship her entire life, but her faith in the Almighty God was beyond question. And yet, she died here, her life free of great sin and still full of beauty. She had chosen a difficult path for herself.” Ōji’s voice descends into a tinge of melancholy, but I cannot find any mercy in her words. “And though this horrible tragedy has taken

place, the girls have not yet learned their lesson. They have not renounced their sins, even as they live knowing that Kaori lost her life as a sacrifice. That is not the manner of a human. The students of class D are all sinners, and sinners cannot be permitted to sully my institution. Garbage such as them must always be burnt away.”

“Wait, so you’re saying that the students of class D killed Kaori Tachibana?”

“No. That would give them too much credit. Miss Kokutō, Kaori took her own life. But I cannot expect you to understand what that truly implies.” Her gaze full of disdain doesn’t stray away from me for a second even as I wonder what she’s truly trying to say. At the very least, I can gather that class D was somehow involved in Kaori Tachibana’s death in the fire. But what did she mean that I wouldn’t understand?

“Then all of this is payback for Kaori Tachibana’s sake?”

“Correct. I swear that as long as I stand, those girls will see hellfire, and they will find no rest in their days here in Reien.”

“So you would kill them, then?” I ask desperately, though I think the answer is obvious enough already. Misaya Ōji recognizes no humanity in her prey. Murder is not enough for her. She will see them purged thoroughly. But even as I think this, she surprises me by shaking her head.

“Why should I? Killing them is no guarantee that they will be sent to the pits of hell where they rightfully belong. This is why I say you do not understand, though I do not blame you. Stay your hand and stand down, Miss Kokutō. I do not desire to fight you today.” She brushes the invisible fairy perched on her shoulder as she says this; a subtle, yet unnerving movement. “Though you cannot truly see them, these little folk are pregnant with memories, yours included. Striking, isn’t it? Your memories are the beauty of cold, smooth marble, yet they burn with an inner fire. And though they are as unseen to me as the fae are to you, I can feel the purity of your recollections. You are truly splendid, Miss Kokutō.” Her gentle smile only serves to make her tender speech more unnerving.

And when I look at her, I welcome the arrival of another emotion, one I haven’t felt in this intensity in almost three years. An emotion that I felt when I

first saw Mikiya with Shiki. The urge to kick the ass of the woman in front of me as hard as I can.

We stand there for a few more moments as she waits for my reply, and I don't give an inch to her thinly veiled threat. As far as I'm concerned, she's violated me as surely as if she'd stolen all of my belongings, and that demands a display of response as potent as I can muster. I banish the thought of escaping from my mind, and stay until finally, I elicit a small sigh from Misaya.

"You have made your choice, then. And I was so looking forward to getting to know you better. Is there truly no room in your heart for a truce, Miss—"

"None whatsoever," I quickly cut in. Misaya only chuckles.

"Is that so? A shame. I had taken you for kindred, and we share so much alike. Our intense passions for our brothers, for example."

"Wh—wha," I struggle to finish but the word doesn't come out completely. My throat dries instantly, and I know my face is turning beet red by the second. Misaya Ōji, on the other hand, only closes her eyes, truly enjoying herself.

"Yes, it came straight from your lips yesterday, but I suppose you do not remember. I know about your brother, and about you becoming a mage. You see? We travel in the same direction. Though you have practiced the Art for half a year now, I have claimed it only recently."

The Art. That most potent of words strikes me deep, and reinforces my understanding of the situation's gravity: that I am fighting another weaver of magic, and that the unconventional nature of such duels makes them quick and deadly.

Misaya continues. "When Kaori died, I learned how to craft the fae familiars, and the Art of robbing memories. Not for the typical mage's lofty goals of enlightenment, but as tools for my own purpose. I collect the memories relating to Kaori only for her sake, to remove all vestiges of her shame. I care little about anything else. I am not destroying anything, nor committing murder. And you still think this a selfish goal, Miss Kokutō?"

"I don't think it's for me to judge, but you have terrorized the students of class D, as well as troubled a teacher. Why you had to affect Mr. Kurogiri though, I

can't seem to grasp." At the mention of his name, I notice Misaya's eyebrow twitch. She must know as well that Mr. Kurogiri only became class D's homeroom instructor well after Kaori Tachibana died and Hideo Hayama disappeared. He has little relation to the incident. Why, then, has he too had his memory plundered by the fairies? "It seems to me to be a bit overzealous for you to take his," I say outright.

I thought she would betray some flaw in her plan, but contrary to what I expected, she lowers her worried eyebrow and scoffs with a noise half in annoyance as well as amusement.

"Not overzealous, I should think. All this is of little consequence to him, but the truth must still be hidden from him."

"But why?"

Misaya Ōji turns sideward, her hair swaying gently swaying as she answers. "Because my blood is his blood. Because he is my true brother." "Your true brother? Him?" I stutter out, unbelieving. Maybe it's nothing but a great coincidence, but I realize that it isn't out of the realm of possibility. The Ōji all adopt their daughters, so Misaya's former name might really have been Misaya Kurogiri, for all I know.

Misaya elaborates, unmindful of my surprise. "At first, I didn't know. After Kaori's death, I was full of suspicion at the entirety of class D, and turned to their new instructor in my desperation. I talked to him, asking for some way to help me deal with all this, when alone I could do nothing. And Mr. Kurogiri was truly kind. For the sake of knowing this gentle soul better, I snatched his memories. But that too was a blessing, for there in his dreaming was the proof that he was my true brother. Somehow, he knew something about the true nature of Kaori's death, and so regrettably I had to silence him."

She casts her eyes downwards before continuing. "Once when I was little and knew nothing, my brother said to me that I should honor the living more than the dead. But how can I do that now, when the ones still alive, living peacefully, are the ones that pushed Kaori to her suicide? I remembered what my brother said to me long ago, and so I couldn't stand to see him burdened by that knowledge. So I took away his memory of the incident, and of me being his sister. All of it.

Satsuki will live without worry, and love me without regret. And having done this, there is no turning back for me.”

I am at a loss for words at the gravity of her act. She says we are alike, a statement that may be true. But I look at her, and listen to her, and realize that we are alike only in so many superficial ways. What we desire may be similar, but our means cannot be more different.

“But that had a use to you as well, didn’t it?” I reply. “You took his memories only to preserve the secret of class D. But what will you do about me, I wonder?”

“That will be decided by you soon enough, surely? I have taught you about our common ground, Miss Kokutō, and I understand the discord within you. And with time, I can grant you the thing which you’ve longed for so much.”

Misaya holds out her hand to me, conciliatory and genuine. I look at her outstretched arm, the arm of an enemy that throws her crimes in my face. “I’m willing to overlook this, on a condition...” I lie to her.

At the same time, I think about what she is truly capable of doing, and a thought crosses my mind, unbidden. If she could truly do as she says she can do

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“...if you can bring back to me a long forgotten memory.”

—then perhaps her Art can be mine.

“A forgotten memory?” she says, amused.

“Like you, I have a brother that I love dearly. But the memory of the moment I fell in love with him has been lost. If you can bring back that memory from my mind—”

“It cannot be done, I’m afraid. If you yourself have forgotten it, it is no longer a memory. Merely a record of one. And the fae only extract the former.”

I sigh, disappointed, but also somewhat relieved.

“Then it seems a deal can’t be brokered between us.” I tense my muscles for what I know will come next. There is little distance between us. Only two bounding steps, and I can be close enough to kick her in the face if I wanted to.

Misaya too, leans forward, shifting her center.

“Miss Kokutō, you know that a familiar must be crafted from something, yes?”

I know at least that much. Does she think I’m new to the Art?

“Then you must know that what you hold in your hand was borne from some material.” There is a keenness to her smile.

I find that my gaze falls to the thing I have been keeping secured in my hand the entire time. But though before I couldn’t see it, now I find that I can. The fairy’s appearance differs from what I expected. Here, in my hand, is the form of a person I had seen only once, a little Hideo Hayama. I inadvertently let it go with a startled cry.

In that instant of weakness, Misaya Ōji rushes forward. I black out with the kind of intensity that overtakes victims of blood loss, but before it I see only the image of Misaya Ōji reaching out with a hand and touching my forehead.

*“If memories are painted in our minds as clearly as any image, why are we able to forget?” he asks.*

*“Forgetting is natural,” I answer.*

*“Those are only things you can’t bring to mind. Even you remember such things. Memories slough off me like rotten skin, but my mind is not the mind of man. The mind of man loses nothing,” he says.*

*“But to be unable to bring something to mind is to forget it,” I protest. “Forgetting is a degeneration, not a loss. Only excess from which color retreats. Isn’t it wasteful? All of it is the stuff of eternity, withering and rusting. But such eternity can only be disposed by one’s own will,” he says. I offer no answer. “Eternity is relentless, and this lingering grief must be retrieved and returned to you. Though you think it lost to oblivion, the memory repeats like a record.”*

*“Who decides what is eternal and what is not?” I ask.*

*“No one knows. That is why we search,” he answers.*

*He is one for whom thoughts are foreign and cannot be derived, one whose answers are merely emanations of the past, and of snatched ideas and the disparate thoughts of strangers.*

A knock on the door rouses me to wake. Immediately, I see the window, and the ashen sunlight streaking through it that makes me unable to determine whether it’s morning or noon. A quick glance at the desk clock confirms my

suspicion that it is already past noon.

“Miss Kokutō, are you there?” I hear a voice call from outside the room. It’s only then that the splitting headache I always get from oversleeping starts to become apparent, and reflexively, I hold a hand to the side of my head because of the pain. I try to ignore it as I descend from the top bunk and open the door to the room.

Standing outside the door is one of the nuns, who gives me a once over before a look of confusion settles on her face.

“Hi. Yeah. Shiki Ryōgi,” I say lazily before I notice that I have to keep up appearances. “I am a transferee for the upcoming term.”

“Er, yes, of course,” says the sister, her look of suspicion slackening but not really disappearing. “Miss Kokutō has a phone call from her family.” It figures that the one time he family calls, she’s not around to take it. Oh well, nothing to be done about it.

“Perhaps I could take the call in her place, seeing as she is out,” I say. “I am close to the Kokutō family, after all.” At least if you count their estranged son, I suppose.

“I see. Then there is no problem. I shall have the call transferred to the lobby phone, so please hurry.” The nun gives one curt bow before leaving quickly. I move to exit the room, but realize that I still have Azaka’s oversized pajamas on. I get them out of the way and change into one of Azaka’s uniform robes, walking as fast as I can to the lobby in the dormitory entrance.

I saw the phone in the lobby yesterday, lacking any dials or buttons, but it was sitting next to a really neat sofa, so maybe they’re hoping that makes up for it. According to Azaka, they filter the calls, which first go to a room managed by one of the sisters. If it’s not the family of one of the students, they have to reject it. If the call has their approval, they have it transferred to the lobby phone, where the student can take the call privately.

Even when I’m going to the lobby, I already have a good idea who’s calling, and when I arrive and pick up the receiver, it only confirms my suspicions.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Azaka?” It’s a voice I know very well. Mikiya’s voice. I give the lobby a once-over to see if no one’s around before talking.

“Nope, not this time. Azaka’s out. It’s only the fifth day of the new year and already you’re pining after your sister?” I say in an unusually cold way, even for me.

“Shiki, where’s Azaka?”

“Dunno. Out, like I told you, doing something or another. She’s been in a hell of a hurry since this morning when she tried her best to wake me up. I think she really wants to take care of things as fast as possible and hurry back home.”

“Really? She doesn’t seem to enjoy herself much when she’s at home, though. I told her it’d be easier if she stayed over there.”

“I don’t think here being better for her is any real deterrent for her to go home, if you know what I mean.” Of course he doesn’t. “So, what’s your business, Mikiya?”

“Nothing in particular. I was planning on surprising Azaka, but that’s not too important. Just wanted to check up on how the two of you are doing.” “Well, I can’t say for sure. Maybe if you call up again tomorrow, you can ask Azaka yourself. See ya.”

“No, wait a minute, Shiki!” I hear his voice coming from the receiver right after I move it away from my ear. I look at myself at the mirror at the far end of the room, seeing myself holding the receiver and frowning. I can’t rightly place why.

“You called to talk to Azaka. You don’t have anything to say to me, right?”  
“Yes, I do! I’ve been worried about you. Talk to me for a while. Besides, if I’d wanted to talk to you, I’d have said Azaka’s name to the nuns over there anyway, since they don’t allow any phone calls except for family. Anyway, any progress on the search?”

“Some. Not a lot. Anyway, I really hate talking on the phone, so *maybe* we can do this later when I’m not interrupting you.”

“Alright. Fine. I mean, it’s not like I’m allowed to call you again today anyway, so maybe I’ll call you tomorrow.” There’s just that little bit of sarcasm

in how Mikiya says it...on second thought, maybe talking to him for a little while isn't so bad.

"Well, if you're free anyway, maybe you can do me a favor. I can't find out anything from here, so maybe you'll have more luck outside. There's a former instructor here in Reien by the name of Hideo Hayama, and also a guy named Satsuki Kurogiri. Any chance you can get their work history before they got here?"

Mikiya sighs. "Well, won't know 'til I try."

"It's not totally important, so it's alright if you can't," I reassure him "I don't want you getting reckless. Don't go doing anything illegal or something just to get it. Anyway, I probably need to go and look for Azaka wandering around the campus."

"Wait, wait. If you're asking me for a favor, then I'll ask you one too. There's a student there named Kaori Tachibana, and I'd like you to search on her records. Attendance records in PE, disciplinary actions, stuff like that. Reien keeps a tight lid on their paperwork, so I can't access it from where I am."

I vaguely wonder for a moment what he's up to, but it's sure to be something that has to be useful if it's investigating a Reien student.

"Alright. If I can, I'll do it. Bye for now, Mikiya." After saying that, I put the receiver back on.

## **Records in Oblivion - IV**

*Sleep, Miss Kokuto. Within your hollow dreamscapes lies the grief that I will repeat.*

The last words I hear from Misaya Ōji before I descend into oblivion. When my eyes close, darkness overtakes me, and for a moment, there is a nothingness of neither dream nor sleep. And then, within the stirrings of the dreaming, I gaze on eternity.

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*But I hate that. I want to be special.*

I said that once. But when did I say it? I don't even remember the face of who I was talking to, or what I looked like at the time. It was a very, very long time ago. When I came of age, I've only yearned for the shadow of that one word. Like a curse, it hung over me, and I couldn't love any life that led me closer to it. I don't truly know why. But I know that I don't want to be like everyone else around me. Awakening mundanely, living mundanely, and sleeping mundanely; I scorned their nature.

I am me and me alone. I have to be different. The child that embraced that vague concept soon came to think of "different" as outclassing everyone else. But when I grew up, I freed myself from the innocent but confining vestiges of those youthful thoughts. Every year, my body forced itself into adulthood, and

every year I kept the secret, deceiving everyone that I was normal; though inside, my difference with the other children my age only widened.

Performing well in academics was never my road to becoming special. I wanted to be more than this, a thing apart altogether. It didn't mean to be the best in everything. It didn't mean to be weak, either. Only something else. And it was an impulse that led me to abandon so many connections. With this impulse, I hurt people, estranged myself, sometimes even made them fear me. And it made me happier to slough away the excess. My friends, my teachers, and even my parents gave me the strange sort of distant praise that always follows those that clearly overreach. And through all this, some fashion of peace over my perturbed soul seemed almost at reach.

It was a time when it almost felt as if something else held dominion over me, something that longed to return to some primal origin, predetermined before I was even born. As a child who followed this urge, I could never judge if it was right or wrong. I only knew that if I indulged it, my wish of being a different thing would become true.

A thing apart. A thing that can't live with others. A thing that can only hurt. And I tried to fool myself into thinking that this benefited me. But in the end, it wasn't some princely figure that shook me from this stupor. It happened naturally, almost entirely without my notice.

*Now what are you doing all by yourself, Azaka? It's boring to play alone. Come on home. It's getting late.*

It was only one boy.

I was ever alone, and because I allowed myself to believe that this was better, I hated him cruelly. But he always sought me out, always drew me in to play his games. When even my parents were distant, he was always close at hand to offer a laugh. He talked to me unconditionally. At first I thought he was only dim-witted, yet he would often grab my hand without a care, and always led me back home. Only he could have done that. After all, he was my brother.

And it was then that I dared to hope that the distance I created for the sake of being different allowed him to entertain the thought, even if in jest and in passing, that I was not a child of our house, that I was of different blood. He

should always be away from me, to nurture that thought. And though the idea pricked my heart like the thorn of a hedge, I came to realize that I had wasted my days in my obsession.

I followed my brother with my eyes every which way he went. He never drove away a frightening dog, or defended me when my parents were scolding me, or saved me from drowning in a river. But all the same, I had to admit to myself one day that the affection I held for him had turned to love. And it made me hate him even more. Because how could I hold this irrational love for him, of all people? But no matter how much I denied it, there was nothing to be done about it. And I found myself looking forward to the little episodes where he would call for me as I played alone. To the child that I was, maybe the scorn was nothing more than an echo of my loneliness.

How many times did I try to summon the will to apologize to my brother? I had looked down on him for so long, but I couldn't let an apology form whole. He let me experience something better, but the child who threw away what she thought was merely dross found that she couldn't muster the simple words of thanks.

Sometimes, I wonder what my brother has done to me. He hasn't attempted his foolish sermonizing, and if he had tried, he would have found me well prepared. It seemed almost a change of heart lacking a reason, a love without a true beginning. But no. There *must* be a reason. I've only lost it, forgotten the most important thing. And I have to remember it, so I can start believing in myself again, and believe that this love is certain and true. And when that happens, maybe I can finally say that I am sorry for the first time in my life, even if it may well and truly be a clumsy apology.

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“Wake up, Azaka. You’ll catch a cold out here.”

I know that voice. It is a voice more a man’s than a woman’s, and when I hear it, I slowly open my eyes. Someone has a hand on my back, helping me up while staring into my face. The hand holding me up is solid and almost cold. My vision

is still hazy, but I can more or less see that I fell asleep on some corridor, and someone is trying to wake me up.

“Miki—” I find myself whispering a name, but I quickly stop myself when I see the clear black hair of the one I’m facing. Me and Shiki Ryōgi both notice the name I was about to say, and stare at each other more than either of us found comfortable.

Until Shiki suddenly slips her hand away from my back. Then with a loud thud, my upper body slams hard on the wooden floor, leading to a sudden white flash of pain.

“What the hell was that for, you ass?!” I protest before proceeding to stand up in as intimidating a matter as I can muster.

Shiki only glances at me with lazy eyes. “Well that should wake you up.” “Yes, awake enough to forget whatever important thing it was I was dreaming, you clumsy barbarian!” I shout. It takes all my force of will just to stop myself from hitting her.

“So you got hit by them again, I guess.” When she says this, I try to remember.

I was talking to Misaya Ōji, and I was sure I captured one of the fairies while it was happening. She cast some kind of illusion on it. I was surprised. She rushed at me, made me sleep. And the next thing I knew, here’s Shiki. “Huh, that’s strange. They attacked me for sure, but they took nothing from my mind. I remember everything that happened.”

“So you know who our fairy mage is? You’ve got a name and a face?” Shiki asks. I nod. Unfortunately, it wasn’t someone we had ever expected, nor someone I cared to accuse carelessly. I glance at my wristwatch, and I realize that it hasn’t been more than a few minutes since I fell asleep. Maybe she was planning on doing something to me, but she noticed Shiki was coming and made a break for it before she could pull anything off. I suppose this time, Shiki really did save me.

“*Thanks, Shiki,*” I murmur under my breath, making positively sure she couldn’t have the pleasure of hearing it. “Yes, I know who our culprit is. It’s Misaya Ōji.”

“That tall girl we saw for a while yesterday?”

“That’s the one. Little time has passed between our conversation and now, so I’m thinking she escaped to hide from you.”

Shiki nods in acknowledgement, putting a hand on her chin as she thinks. From her her furrowed brow, I can see she’s thinking that something doesn’t quite fit.

“What’s wrong, Shiki? Having a spot of indigestion?”

“Wasn’t she one of those that had a bout of forgetfulness too?” She’s right, but whatever turn of events that might imply is a secondary concern for now. Shiki seems to arrive at a conclusion close to mine. “Whatever, we can ask her what’s up when we see her. Anyway, you got a call from Mikiya. He asked if we could look into some student’s records, one Kaori Tachibana or somesuch.”

“What?” I say in genuine surprise. That was a name I didn’t expect to hear out of her or Mikiya. I never wanted him involved in this business. Back in summer, he got caught up in this stupid ghost incident that left him asleep for three weeks. Fortunately, since Mikiya lives alone, our parents never knew, and Miss Tōko took care of him while he was in his short coma. Thank God for her, because if she wasn’t there, he would’ve died in three days or less. Ever since then, I’ve never wanted him involved in what Shiki and Miss Tōko are doing for a living. But how does he know about the whole mess about the fire, and what name to look up? I’m fairly certain I said all of one sentence about the fire to him last November, but surely that wasn’t enough to spark his interest. Miss Tōko promised she’d keep it a secret, too. Then how did he call with such good timing, and with information to work on? Who did he talk wi—

“Oh, why didn’t I think of it before? It’s always you, isn’t it Shiki? You told him where we were going before we left, and that made him curious! And now he’s probably pried the entire thing out of Miss Tōko.” I say, anger boiling under my voice.

“What?” she raises her voice in protest. “He was worried I wasn’t telling him where I was going, and he wanted to know! You’re fault for not being there to take the call this afternoon and make him back down.”

I sigh. I hate to admit it, but she’s right about the call. I could have scolded him

then and there and that would have been the end of it. Shiki shifts gears, ignoring my complaint.

“Anyway, that’s done and we can’t do anything about it. Mikiya said something about looking at the girl’s PE attendance record and such. What do you think? Is it gonna turn up anything?”

“PE attendance record?”

What could that possibly tell us? Some kind of code, or some—

Then in a flash of recollection, I remember what Misaya Ōji said. Kaori Tachibana didn’t die because she couldn’t escape from the fire. She killed herself. But there was one important factor that I neglected to ask Misaya Ōji, and that would be Kaori Tachibana’s

“—reason for killing herself.” I mutter, leaving Shiki to raise an eyebrow. She and her questions can wait. I break into a run. Shiki, mystified, doesn’t seem inclined to follow me, which is all the same to me just now. I need to make this quick. I run out of the ruined dormitory, hurrying back into the path that goes straight through the forest and leads into the main school building.

I know exactly where I’m going. The infirmary wing will likely have records on the students, and my position as class president and my dispensation from the Mother Superior might just be enough to get one of those records out.

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It only takes a little buttering up for the school nurse and administrator to cough up the documents I need, and within a few minutes, they allow me to peruse Kaori Tachibana’s health and PE records, as well as her related infirmary logs.

Second term started from September up to winter break, and the PE for class D at that time consisted entirely of field trips or other out-of-school activities, with the homeroom instructor supervising. Kaori Tachibana’s October attendance record is replete with spots of absences, and a week before the fire in the old

dormitory started, she didn't attend PE class at all. Just to make sure, I ask the school nurse, and as I expected, she did indeed have a check-up in that period. The cards are starting to turn face up, but the looming presence of our enemy can't be avoided as long as we're here.

## / 4

Afternoon passed and the sun soon fell, far too early for what I'm usually used to. Students are already starting to return to their dormitories and rooms, as the daily Reien curfew of 6:00pm draws near. Having just eaten dinner in the dining hall, we make like some of the students and go back to Azaka's room.

Outside the window of her room, the sky is a blanket of star-filled night, and darkness envelops the entirety of the campus, pockets of light from windows and pathway lamps lighting up certain portions of it here and there. Nothing breaks the desolate silence except for the blow of the wind, and the rustle of trees swaying from its brush. If it weren't for the whole boarding school system thing, this might have actually been a pretty nice place to go to school in. The high school I (sort of) go to in the middle of Tōkyō is infernally noisy at most times of the day.

I enter the room ahead of Azaka, and sit myself down immediately on the inviting top bunk. Azaka makes sure to lock the door, and with a sway of her hair, she turns to face me with a troubled look on her face.

"Shiki, you're hiding something." Now she has an index finger pointed squarely at me.

"I don't know what you're talking about. And let's be honest here, aren't you not telling me something too?"

"I'm talking about a physical object, you dunce. Just stop fussing about it and hand over the knife you stole back in the dining hall," Azaka says with a frustrated but not entirely non-belligerent voice.

Well, that's a genuine surprise. I actually *am* carrying a bread knife, stolen straight from the dining hall and hidden right in my sleeve. Either that knife is too big or I've been slipping in my weapon hiding skills if even someone like Azaka noticed it. Well, I *have* been practicing too much with the sword I got last November, so maybe that's why.

"Oh c'mon, it hardly carries an edge," I protest. It doesn't seem to matter to Azaka, though, who closes to the foot of the bed.

"No. I don't care. That's final. Anything you hold turns into a precision death weapon anyway. I won't have any accidental deaths in Reien on my watch."

"You're doing a pretty piss poor job of it considering there's already been a murder in here."

"There is a difference between an accident and a murder, you know. Enough. Just hand over the knife. I don't know how many times I have to repeat our objective here before it gets through your thick head."

"You're a bigger idiot than I thought if you still think we're getting away from here without a fight." I show Azaka no intention to give up the knife, and she takes it as her cue to start making her way up to my bunk.

I was serious about what I said to her. I didn't steal the knife just for kicks. I told Azaka about me taking out one of the fairies, but I didn't tell her that I got pricked by it too. I don't know if that was enough for Misaya Ōji to have access to some of my memories, but I have no intention of letting it happen twice...and besides, the design on the knife is pretty good and elaborate, even for the school. If I could take it out of here, it would sit pretty beside the other knives.

Azaka stops at the top of the ladder to my bunk. "You're really not going to hand it over, Shiki?"

"Have I ever told you how much of a persistent bull you are? Not your most attractive trait. It's why Mikiya keeps breaking his promises to meet up with you and stuff. Like this New Year's."

Azaka's face scrunches up in a bundle of annoyance. Somehow, I think I might have hit a nerve.

"Fine. I've been waiting to do this for a long time anyway." Then she jumps on

me with as much force as she can. The tackle forces me from my sitting position, and makes me fall down on the bed, Azaka on top of me. She wrestles and pushes me down with surprising force and starts reaching for the knife in my sleeve.

The girl is a regular temper case. Almost like a wounded, cornered bear if you threaten her enough to get mad. Words aren't nearly enough to make her back down from what she wants, so reluctantly, I take the knife out of my sleeve and hand it to her only to finish our ridiculous episode on top of the bed. As soon she gets the knife, she scrambles down from the top bunk and walks toward her desk, and I remain lying on top of the bed.

"Fucking retard strength. You put a bruise in my arm, you know that? What the hell do they feed you here, steroids?"

"Just a regular diet of bread and vegetables, thank you," she says, her tone mocking. As she hides the knife inside her desk and checks again to make sure the door is locked, I pull myself up, returning to my previous sitting position and looking at Azaka's back. It probably would have been fine if I'd ended it then and there, but I had to blurt out again.

"I didn't expect you to be that strong. Should be enough to push Mikiya down on the bed when you finally do it." In an instant, Azaka's face turns red. Well, I don't actually know since she has her back turned to me, but her red ears aren't painting a flattering picture.

"Wh, wh, wha—" she stammers, swallowing her words. She turns around to look at me. I knew her face was red. "What the heck did you just say?" "Nothing. Nothing important to me at least." She doesn't rise to the bait. We stare at each other for a time, me and Azaka's blushing red face. When it seems like we've heard the clock's second hand tick for what must be the hundredth time, Azaka exhales a disappointed sigh and asks.

"So you know?" She seems to hold her breath for the answer.

"It wasn't me that noticed it first, I can tell you that. No need to worry though. Mikiya doesn't know a thing."

With great relief, Azaka lets go of her breath. It's true what I said. I didn't notice it first. It was **Shiki** that saw through Azaka the first time they met. And

through him, *Shiki* came to know it as well. If he hadn't been there, I don't think even I would have known about it. She's so guarded around Mikiya, and if he's not around he hardly even talks about him or even so much as steers the conversation in a direction remotely close to her brother, except to talk about how bad an influence I am, and so forth.

Refreshing herself and regaining her usual composure, she looks back at me.

"Aren't you mad at me, *Shiki*?" I don't really get why I should be, but I'm not, and so shake my head. It only succeeds in making her look more confused.

Wait, are we still talking about Mikiya? But he's not my—  
—he's not my what?

I try to put the thing out of my mind, by just asking Azaka the first question that comes to mind. "You're siblings, right? Why're you into that sort of thing?" Unfortunately, it turns out to be the most landmine filled question I could spontaneously come up with.

She doesn't lose her cool, but she does allow her eyes to wander around the room as she thinks. "It's because...I like being special. Or more accurately, I like things that are denied me, things that flirt with the taboo. Hence, Mikiya. He just doesn't...he just can't return what I feel, and maybe I'm happy being that way. I'm lucky, aren't I? I'll always be near the person I like."

Inside myself, I'm laughing. Not at her, but my unexpected but seemingly accurate observation that all the weirdos always seem to have a thing for Mikiya.

"You're sick."

"You're one to talk!"

The abruptness of both our replies does not escape the notice of either of us, and for a few seconds, we are silent. But then she smiles, and I smile as well. And in a wordless agreement, we decide to leave it at that and go to sleep.

Azaka clearly has something to do to tomorrow relating to the investigation, since she seems to fall asleep only a minute after hitting the sack. My nocturnal habits are completely at odds with this school's curfew though, so it's much

harder for me to just fall asleep when I feel like it. I stay awake for a long time, hearing the second hand on Azaka's wall clock tick two hours away as I do nothing save for staring at the scenery outside the window opposite the bed. Now even the few precious lights that glowed faintly in the campus have all been snuffed out. Beyond the quad, there is only the deep darkness of Reien's forest, where the light of the moon can't seem to pierce through the canopy of foliage, whose earlier stirrings have now given way to the eerily thick and unbreakable silence.

As quietly as I can make it, I reach inside my left sleeve. What Azaka doesn't know is that I stole two knives from the dining hall. I draw it from my sleeve and take it out, holding it up above my head such that what little light from outside can strike off it. I was planning on using this one here, and the one Azaka got as a display item when I got home. I wish I wouldn't have to sully this blade here, but I realize now that it's a fool's hope.

"Everyone's so busy tonight," I whisper to myself when I return to looking at the forest outside, only to see numerous faint but wandering lights flitting around in the darkness of Reien like fireflies. There must be ten or twenty of them at least. Yesterday night I saw something similar, but only one or two, and I doubted they were anything except a figment of my imagination. Now there can be no doubt that they're the fairies, and their activity tonight implies something suspicious. Must be because of what happened to Azaka this afternoon. Now, the mage who's controlling all these fairies is forced to speed up her plans.

"You're gonna get a test drive soon enough," I murmur as the blade glints in my hand, letting it catch the dull moonlight from the window. This will be the last night I spend in Reien, I'm sure. Whatever has to happen, it's clear that it has to happen tomorrow.

## **Records in Oblivion - V**

*“I don’t know what is so good about this arrangement,” I say.*

*“There is still a way. There is always a way to mend that which is broken,” the man answers.*

*“But can I still be restored?” I ask.*

*“I can remake things. Make them whole again. The sin is not yours, and such pure things need not touch that which is unclean. Remain as you are, and all will be well,” he answers.*

*“But am I pure? Once, perhaps. But now, I am not so sure.”*

*“Though you push back the growing darkness in you with your own hands, those hands are still clear, still contain no taint.” He nods, and laughs a sweet laugh. “And they must remain as such. Filth like that are a cancer on this world, and must remove themselves or be excised. It is a mercy to do so, for such impurities travel with the soul, to one’s line, passed on in a dynasty of endlessly repeated curses. And so as not to sully you, another must be used.”*

*But what will come of it? I cannot answer, and I do not voice the impudent question to the man.*

*“Eternity is relentless, and this lingering grief must be retrieved and returned to you. Though you think it lost to oblivion, the memory repeats like a record,” he says.*

*“I have forgotten nothing, least of all that,” I reply.*

*“The oblivion are thoughts missing in your consciousness, wandering in the*

*vast wastes of the oneiros. Not forgotten, not lost,” he says flatly. What, then, explains the gaps in my memory? “I do not understand. What of the part of me that has been lost?”*

“*The stirrings and thoughts that orient around your brother,*” answers the man. “*Should you wish it, I shall play back that echo of nothingness.*” It was an easy thing to say yes.

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January 6, Wednesday.

In the past few days, the weather has taken on a predictable pattern, with gray cloudy mornings and clear nights. This morning proves to be no different, and it seems resolute to pursue this pattern for a while.

The first thing I see when I wake up is the clock. “Seven...thirty,” I whisper groggily. I can’t believe I overslept for an hour. I immediately climb out of bed and whip myself up into a whirlwind of multi-tasking, taking off my pajamas, slipping into my uniform, fixing my hair, and finally attempting to wake up Shiki, still asleep on the top bunk.

I try and try to call her name but it is fruitless; she doesn’t budge an inch. It’s her fault for sleeping so late after me; and yet despite the fact that she slept at such an ungodly hour she somehow never found the time to slip out of the uniform robes and into some sleeping attire. Still, I don’t think it matters to her really, since she never seems to complain about whether it’s warm or cool. She grinds her teeth for a few seconds under the blanket that covers her entirely. How annoying. Otherwise, she sleeps as still as a statue, and so I write waking Shiki up as a lost cause and give up.

Our objective to observe hasn’t changed. The incident with Misaya Ōji was an unnecessary encounter, and though we now know who the culprit is, there’s no need for me and Shiki to go around trying to eliminate or capture her. Besides, I don’t think Misaya Ōji is still at a dormitory at this point. When I tried to check up on where she was yesterday, just before night fell, the answer I got was that

she had filed a formal report to leave the school for winter break that morning. In other words, as far as the school was concerned, she wasn't on Reien grounds anymore (though obviously, at least until our encounter, that was false). If she's smart, she'll follow through on that report and leave, and she won't try to come into contact with me or Shiki ever again.

Still, she was driven to accomplish something here, and something tells me that despite my conciliatory attitude toward her, and the last chance to withdraw that she gave me, she'll try again. It's hard to imagine her showing up herself and attacking us sometime today, but they do say that third time's the charm. Just in case, I grab my magical tool of choice: a glove made out of salamander skin, used to channel my Art. I tuck it in my pocket securely and head out of the room.

Outside in the corridor, the temperature is practically freezing, and I find that I have to keep moving if I want my body to stay warm. I pay a visit to some of the rooms of the class D students, but most of them are already out of their rooms. The few individuals I do meet aren't of any help. Most of them seem out of it, never meeting your eyes, and like in some kind of lethargy. I would have believed that they were all taking some kind of strong narcotic if not for their sudden and ready refusal to talk to me. Their eyes suddenly take on a glint of mixed fear and disdain. Had Shiki been with me and been able to keep their boiling hostility in check, it might not have been so bad. But I don't think I would have been able to talk to them like that alone, so that seems like a lost cause as well. I give up trying to talk to them for now.

I relocate from the dormitories to the main school building, asking some of the instructors questions, but while they were kind enough to entertain me, they were all similarly unhelpful. Feeling like I've wasted my time, I head back to the dormitory to my room to regroup and rethink all the information I already have.

I go in to find Shiki still sleeping persistently. Her eyes twitch for a moment, and I hope for a second that she's already waking up. But after a few more moments of waiting, I realize she's just in REM sleep. Disappointed, I sit down on the chair in front of my desk and think.

The information I got from perusing Kaori Tachibana's infirmary documents yesterday was enlightening. The fact that class D's PE consisted mostly of field

trips wasn't so important. It's a common enough event in Reien, and even the school nurse said as much. The useful portion came when I compared the dates of her physical examinations and the class field trips.

I don't know how it goes in other schools, but seeing as its important medical knowledge in all of Reien's students, the school keeps a record of each student's menstrual cycles. What I found out was that she was able to go on the class field trip on the time when she's usually excused from doing so because of her period, and when I asked the school nurse, she said that she was certain that Kaori Tachibana had reported a late period. She also assured me that it was merely stress that was responsible, but that's only because she doesn't know the circumstances surrounding the girl.

Her period being late might only be one part of the story, a conclusion all too easily reached when she never had the opportunity to have another one seeing as she died the next month. She might never have had a period at all in the month of October. The most obvious reason might also be the answer: pregnancy.

At first, the period doesn't come, but then the quickening in her stomach would have felt more real each passing day. From September to November, she must have driven herself into a corner, mentally speaking. After all, in Reien Girl's Academy, getting pregnant seems to be considered a sin quite above murder. It means that at one point, you willingly exited the school without permission, went out into town, and for one reason or another, had sex with someone; a situation that would surely make the Mother Superior or any of the sisters faint were it told to them. And of course, with their very strict and conservative Catholic upbringing, I'm fairly sure Kaori.

Tachibana's parents would have never forgiven her.

There was truly no way out for her. An abortion would require her to go to a hospital, but the doctors would definitely report it to both the school and her parents. I'm willing to bet she didn't know any unlicensed or quack doctors, and would be very hesitant to submit herself to their treatment. And so she spent those few weeks living like a criminal on death row, scared everyday of her stomach growing large enough to be noticeable.

If I believe what Misaya Ōji had to say about Tachibana, though, I find it hard

to believe that such a girl who so intensely follows the traditional Catholic way would be in that kind of relationship.

“Rape then? Hayama Hideo, for a certainty,” I whisper to myself. Who else could it be? And it fits the circumstances. Did he rape Kaori Tachibana, and upon learning she was pregnant, kill her by setting fire to the dormitory building, seeking to simultaneously destroying the evidence and make it look like an accident? It’s a sketchy thought, but it seems to fit the man.

There’s still another thing to consider. The nurse said that Kaori Tachibana was very stressed out, and I don’t think it’s an assessment entirely without meaning. I’ve observed before that class D seemed to be hiding something, and my talk with Fumio Konno confirmed as much.

“She was being harassed,” I venture. That’s entirely possible. After all, she was constantly the highest scorer in the class, and is the only member of the class that got promoted from Reien’s junior high instead of transferring in. That’s the kind of natural environment that bullying is born from. But what about the class president? Fumio Konno didn’t seem like the sort of girl to permit that sort of business to occur and turn a blind eye to it. If even she had to ignore Tachibana’s plight, there must have been some truly compelling reason to do so.

“Like the class knowing about the pregnancy.” That would have been enough of a reason. Enough for me to envision Fumio Konno deciding to just have nothing to do with it. And Tachibana, the poor girl, couldn’t even talk to the nuns who were supposed to support her. Enough of a reason for Tachibana Kaori to commit suicide in that fire. And class D, feeling that they have some dark secret to protect, keep their reticent behavior for the entire school.

“Something’s missing,” I whisper, but I can’t seem to think *what* exactly. It’s easy to sit here and couple fragmented, limited information with personal insight, but turning that into a viable and supported conclusion is quite another task entirely. That’s the kind of thing Mikiya thrives in. At least he knows how to gather information, and how to get people to talk, like a police detective. Compared to him, I’m just the crazy wannabe PI that keeps throwing out ideas with only a modicum of factual basis.

I always really hated those characters in detective fiction that always had the

right guess, with their only excuse being that “it’s possible,” as if they were somehow above the normal person, above even the police detectives that the books always portrayed as weak and ineffectual, when in reality, the converse is true. I know how police detectives work. My cousin Daisuke is one, and I’ve had more than an earful from him. The police detective’s job is to strain an entire desert for the single grain of a gem, to give form and shape to a past that he wasn’t privy to, and in real life, this sometimes takes months, even years of grueling work. The detectives of fiction, at least to my understanding, abandon the process, miss the desert and the clues it gives, in favor of a short-sighted conclusion. Between the real detectives, the average men and women in police departments all over the world, who take all the clues they can get and try to speak for those who died, and the fictional detectives who take the flash of inspiration they get and bandy it as truth; the latter is more trapped by his own folly, and if he were real, he would be always alone in his suppositions beyond normal ken.

It’s quite ironic then, that I find myself in that very same position now. I have neither the time of months to work a case like cousin Daisuke, nor the same resources available to him. So it is with a great regret that I realize that I’ve donned the role of that which I hate. I sigh, realizing I’m at my wits’ end, and lean back on my chair heavily before looking at the wall clock. It’s already near noontime, and the sky outside the window still persists in being cloudy. If anything, they’ve only darkened, and will almost certainly mean rain later. As I think this, a knock comes from the door, and then a voice.

“Miss Kokutō, are you there?” It’s one of the sisters.

“Yes, I am present. Is there something the matter?” I say as I open the door.

“There is a phone call for you. Your brother.” As soon as I hear this, I excuse myself and walk with as much haste as I dare toward the lobby. The lobby is deserted when I arrive, which I am thankful for when I pick up the receiver.

“Hello?” I say, maybe a bit too eagerly.

“Hello, Shiki?”

It’s a good thing I can’t see the frown on my face. “Unfortunately, Shiki is still asleep. Mmm, so you’d call all the way to Reien just to talk to your girlfriend,

Mikiya?” I say with a cold voice. On the other end of the line, Mikiya clears his throat.

“I didn’t say that. I called to ask about how things are going over there.” “You shouldn’t worry. After all, I did say some time ago how you shouldn’t be involved in these *things*.” I raise my voice only slightly, as if it were an interrogative.

“Ah, here we go,” he says, clearly expecting the subject. “It’s not as if I wanted to be involved. But you expect me to ignore the entire thing when you and Shiki are neck deep in it?”

I wanted to give him a definite yes straight out, but that would have been too blunt, and so I hold off on it.

“Fine, fine. So, what is the purpose of this call? Are you planning to talk to Shiki or me?”

“Well, Shiki was the one that asked me, but I think it’d be better if I told you. I’ve found some stuff on Hideo Hayama and Satsuki Kurogiri. Wanna hear it?”

Huh. Shiki never told me about that. I’d chide her for not consulting me first if it wasn’t a pretty good move. Still...

“Oh, *Shiki* told you to do it, did she? Even though she promised that she wouldn’t make you do anything dangerous? I knew she hasn’t learned. It’s clear that she doesn’t care about your well-being if she told you to perform such a dangerous task. Perhaps you should finally consider breaking up with her.” Even I’m surprised by what I end up saying, but predictably, it doesn’t faze Mikiya one bit. In fact, he even laughs.

“Nah, Azaka, she just has a very...unique way of showing how worried she is.” His voice on the other end sounds so pleased, and I wonder what it is that has him so happy. “Anyway, I’m going to bring up the file on the two Shiki asked about.”

I can hear the faint noise of pages being flipped on the other end. A thick file, from the sound of it, and if I know Mikiya, very well arranged to boot. While he’s searching through it, I ask him a question.

“Where are you right now, Mikiya?”

“Miss Tōko’s office. She’s out right now though. Meeting with cousin Daisuke. I’m stuck on watch duty over here,” he says morosely.

“Wait a minute, you mean our cousin Daisuke?!”

“Keep your voice down on the phone, will you? And yes, yes, it’s him.” Daisuke Akimi is my father’s little brother, technically our uncle. Since he’s the youngest of his siblings, he’s very near our age, and we call him cousin as a joke. He’s very close to Mikiya, enough so that someone watching them that doesn’t know better would almost call them brothers. “Apparently he’s an acquaintance of Miss Tōko’s,” Mikiya explains. “When we met in New Year and I told him about where I work, he shouted ‘but that’s Tōko Aozaki, ain’t it!’ and that was that. I think he’s out on a date with Miss Tōko right now. She was like ‘how could I refuse an offer from Kokutō’s cousin,’ and then left me in charge of the place.”

This must be wrong on some level. Even Mikiya sounds displeased by it. So he was Miss Tōko’s contact inside the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department the entire time. If I think about it, it isn’t really surprising for him. He’s a member of the Criminal Investigation Section’s first squad, plainclothesmen that have had a lot of experience on foot, on patrol and in investigation, and so have some of the best street-level contacts in the entire CIS. And even within this group, cousin Daisuke is known as quite talented and driven, but also arrogant and having a disdain for authority. Exactly the kind of person that Miss Tōko would run into, in other words.

“Anyway, he’s not the reason I called,” Mikiya continues. “Before I get back to Hideo Hayama, I gotta ask, have you ever talked to the guy?”

I hear the worry in his voice, and I realize immediately what he’s really asking. “No. No, I haven’t. I know what kind of person Hideo Hayama is, for the most part.”

He sighs, relieved. With slight hesitation, he begins. “Alright, here goes. I’ve been working the commercial district and asking some of the people in the vice squad through cousin Daisuke, and what I’ve heard isn’t pretty. The truth is that Hideo Hayama was pimping out his students, with clients paying for their company. He’d take the students out, probably on the pretense of a trip, and

make them do it.”

I catch myself inhaling sharply. I was prepared for the worst, but I honestly didn’t think it would be anywhere near that. Either Mikiya didn’t hear me, or he ignored me. Either way, he carries on with the report.

“I’m not clear on the details, but you know how much students go in the prostitution arena. And they’re Reien students too, which makes them rare, and the guy knew that too. He was good. Charged high, but not high enough to make people stingy. He’d take them out every two times a week, and judging from the numbers, only a few in the class didn’t go regularly. I don’t know if he was bold or reckless, but he ran a pretty tight ship. Downtown, he was a popular name once, on account of his being flashy and acting like a big spender. He took it further and further every day, and ended up owing something big to a bar, which in turn was owned by some yakuza group. Of course, they wanted to collect. With little options, he turned to Reien, where his estranged brother was the chairman of the board, and I assume he pleaded with him to give him a teaching job there. I’m sure he made his excuses, forged his licenses, and eventually got in. Whether he was planning on starting a student prostitution ring right from the start, or he got the idea later, I don’t truly know, but the fact is that he turned it into his thing pretty fast. And since Reien’s students are largely daughters of rich or influential families, they fetch a pretty price on the street. I heard at first that it was only one student, but the yakuza put the pressure on him, and soon enough he was bringing all of them out. That’s most of the important things, I guess.”

Then Mikiya tells me the names of the students involved, the dates when they went out, and even the rough estimates of the time they went back. He even got some details on the yakuza organization the entire operation was connected to, and I know how hard that can be to ferret out.

“It’s a shame that most of this is unreliable testimony and can’t be used as proof. Take from that what you will,” he says disappointedly. He’s correct in his assessment. The police certainly can’t move on something as little as this, and the vice squad people he contacted are probably building their own case to take the entire thing down all at once. Though Kaori Tachibana’s pregnancy made the entire thing big enough such that even Reien couldn’t possibly have the power to make it disappear, the connection was weak, and the parents of the students were

certainly powerful enough (some of them probably financially involved and invested enough in the yakuza) that they would see the investigation flounder and die a slow death if they ever got wind of it.

“I’m sorry about all this, Azaka,” he says gloomily.

Though the truth is still leaving me in quite a shock, I still find the awareness to give him a nervous “No problem.” But the truth only left us a truckload of problems. The secret that class D was protecting wasn’t Kaori Tachibana’s suicide, but this prostitution ring. Hideo Hayama couldn’t have kept it a secret alone. Even though he may have forced some of the students to go, the ones that went purely for pleasure and weren’t big fans of Reien’s abstinence policy must surely have used their influence to silence the entire class and keep the secret. For them, the temptation to seek something outside the regulation of the school was too much, and Hideo Hayama was their only key to that.

But the confluence of factors that contribute to the entire problem doesn’t end with the people. To an extent, the severity of the institution can be partly to blame as well. It has its tall, ornate walls, the better to divorce it from anything that doesn’t belong in it already. The wind rarely sings inside, and not a sound from beyond the walls can be heard. Time proceeds at a languid, leisurely pace. All of it manufactured to provide some kind of proof against the perceived threat of defilement from what lies outside. But like any airtight room, eventually the air gets stale, becoming gross and fetid. The people here all think it’s some kind of secret world, warded against the other, harsher world. But it’s nothing more than a prison from the real.

“So what led you to ask about Kaori Tachibana, Mikiya? You asked for her grades and everything.” I ask the last mystery I still have left for him.

“The girl in the November fire, right? Remember back then we were in Miss Tōko’s office, and you told me about the fire in your dormitory for a while? Well, after work got a little lighter in December, I looked it up whenever I had free time. Started asking some authorities around. Eventually, cousin Daisuke hooked me up with the autopsy report for the deceased girl, our Kaori Tachibana. Apparently the cause of death is rather more ambiguous than what we may expect. The medical examiner apparently found some evidence that she may have died from heroin overdose, and she may have already been dead before the

fire. But the final word on it is that they couldn't determine either way. The final weird note on her death is that there's a good chance she might have been pregnant, though the state of the body left it officially unconfirmed.

"They're pretty sure, though, that no one led her to the fire to kill her. She was deep enough inside the building that anyone that might have taken her there wouldn't have been able to get out. It's a sad case for her. First the rape, then the pregnancy. Not the kind of thing you thrust on a sixteen year old girl, obviously; she probably couldn't handle it all. Now this next one is just a guess but...I'm thinking when the fire started and everyone was rushing to get out of the dormitory, she's the only one that stayed in her room. She might have actually wanted to die."

"Right," I answer more evocatively than I should have. I can't help myself. Kaori Tachibana's case was all finally starting to take shape. "She has a motive for suicide established, I suppose. I wonder why she didn't just have the baby aborted? If she had said it to Hayama, he might have considered it."

"Wouldn't really know," he answers with a curious voice. "Too young, maybe? Complications?"

"Maybe," I say lazily, thinking of something else. Her pregnancy was the reason Kaori Tachibana was harassed by class D, but not entirely out of the reason that it embarrassed the class. No. As long as she didn't have an abortion, she threatened to spill the little secret that Hideo Hayama and the class had kept in the darkness. Worse, she didn't even have to open her mouth for it to happen. The class probably didn't even wait on the word from Hideo before they started ostracizing Kaori. No physical harm, though. That would have garnered the attention of the sisters sooner or later, which was the last thing they wanted. So for three months, she carried her perceived disgrace and endured the scorn of her class, a mental brand of torture. And then suicide, after the burden proved too great.

"What an incompetent thing to do. If she was so ready to die, then she would have found the pregnancy a much easier ordeal. That hopeless little girl..." I find myself losing my pace for a moment with an unwanted hiccup before recovering. "Throwing out everything she's worked for to just die. She's been here since she was a child, and she lost to someone like Hayama. How—" I

choke on my last words, as I finally realize what I'm blurting out. I close my eyes, willing the tears not to come out. I put a hand on my forehead, thankful that there is no one else in the lobby to see me.

"Losing? Azaka, what are you talking about? This wasn't some game, not some kind of competition with winners or losers. I swear..." he sighs, and my hand moves to my hair before I lean back on the wall. "And she may have committed suicide, but it's probably not for the kind of reason you're thinking of, not for her kind of upbringing." Mikiya's voice is tinged with some regret, though I don't know truly if it's directed at me or at the deceased Kaori.

I gulp and think of my words carefully before asking. "Why do you say that? Don't you think she committed suicide because her classmates were being so hard on her? She probably only saw the escape of death as the only recourse left to desperate individuals such as her. That's the only meaning in her actions, isn't it?"

"Well, I wouldn't expect you to understand," he says. Something resonates in that statement. It's almost the same thing that Misaya Ōji said to me only yesterday.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"See, Kaori Tachibana's been in Reien since she was a kid, right? She's a very traditional, very conservative Catholic. In the Catholic faith, suicide is taken very seriously. It's an old crime to them that not only insults the life you've been given, but also devalues the life you were supposed to live to earn salvation. It's on the same footing as murder to them. For someone that identifies so much with the Catholic faith, Kaori Tachibana had a reason for suicide that, for her, probably goes beyond the rational."

What Mikiya says surprises me, eliciting a small gasp. I'd almost forgotten about Kaori's religion. Unlike the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in Buddhism, Christianity promised salvation in the afterlife. I knew that, of course, but for someone like me who only attended the masses and morning services as a student and not a believer, the fact held little more weight to it than any other English word. But to someone like Kaori, who's zeal and ardor for the Catholic faith had defined her since childhood, they were all she had in this school. The

prospect of suicide to her must have been more fearful than the fact of death could ever have been.

“And that reason being?” I ask. The answer to questions such as these does not come easily to me at all. Mikiya is fond of saying that my drive for competitiveness has burned out at least some of my empathy. Sometimes, he smiles, saying it’s a joke. At times, like in my outburst earlier, I think I often prove him true.

“Atonement, maybe. She took in her sins, and the sins of her classmates, and sacrificed herself to erase the sins of class D, so that she alone falls into the Christian hell. She tried to redeem everyone.”

I say nothing, letting silence settle in for a moment.

*I cannot expect you to understand what that truly implies.* That was what Misaya Ōji said. Her anger was real. She had understood Kaori better than anyone else, and because of that, she cannot find it in herself to forgive class D, little changed from the incident.

*Killing them is no guarantee that they will be sent to the pits of hell where they rightfully belong.* She was right. In Misaya Ōji’s mind at least, killing them wouldn’t mean that they get sent to hell. It wouldn’t be the proper punishment for the people that had made Kaori Tachibana fall. That’s why she hounds them, unseen, all this time. There is no forgiveness left for them. Only the proposition of a death so horrid that all would have to see it.

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The rain is heavy, and the drops that slip through the thick cover of bamboo leaves land on my skin. A thousand frigid daggers burying into me. The first time I have ever really felt the cold. Some of the drops fall onto something metallic, and I notice that it is the blade of a knife that I hold in my hand. Cold rain to match equally cold steel. My cold, expressionless eyes are fixed on someone below me, though I do not know who—

I wake up from a dream, a sensation of familiarity echoing inside my mind, but it is already retreating into a forgotten memory. Before I can process it further though, I open my eyes just a little bit only to catch sight of something small flying nearby. There is no mistaking it: it's one of the fairies. The moment I open my eyes fully, I draw the knife from inside my pocket and throw it as hard as I can toward the fairy in flight. It takes only another instant to hear the dull sound of the knife impacting and clinging to the wall.

Skewered through the knife is one of the fairies, an insect-winged creature just like Azaka's vivid imagination of the things, making a small but high pitched keening sound. I think it's trying to pull the knife out of itself with small hands, but it's no use. With a last small noise, it disappears into the air in a trickle of momentarily bright material, only for that too to wink out of existence.

“Fuck. I shouldn't have killed it. Maybe it could've—”

Maybe it could've what? Made the dream continue? Finally learn the truth about what happened three years ago? Remember the traffic accident that forced

me to a coma? What of it then?

“*Stop thinking* about that right now,” I tell myself as I quickly climb out of bed, readying myself to receive any more unwanted visitors. Just as I jump from the top bunk to the floor, I hear the distinct sound of the creak of the wood outside the door, and the sound of footsteps hurrying away. Someone’s been standing outside the door all this time!

I put the knife back in my pocket and rush to open the door. The corridor stretches both east and west, and when I look east, I see only the shadow of a person running away, the height the only thing distinct about the figure. Misaya Ōji, maybe? Maybe she mistook me for Azaka? Hmph, fat chance of that. I know Azaka still insists on doing exactly as Tōko told her to, but if Misaya Ōji is conducting attacks on us in our room as we sleep, then there’s really no other choice for me.

I pounce on after her, our steps making the hardwood floor groan, the sounds echoing in the corridor’s expanse. She’s faster than I expected, and I can’t close the distance between us. She knows where she’s going, too. She ducks out of the corridor, out the exit from the dormitories, and heads toward the direction of the main school building, using the covered path me and Azaka used the other day. The forest surrounds us for a minute or so of the chase, and the distance between us still remains far enough only for me to barely see her. Finally we emerge back into the school grounds. She doesn’t head to the school building like I expected though, but to the chapel.

A trap. Nothing else to it. But it would be stupid to turn back now after I’ve run so far. She’s cornered here, and we both know it. I catch my breath for a few seconds, wipe the sweat off my brow, and throw open the door to the chapel.

Despite its size, the door doesn’t produce the barest hint of a sound. In the gloomy interior of the deserted chapel, there is only a single individual standing within it all, the shadows of the silhouette long in the afternoon sun. I close the door with as fast as possible, never facing away from the silhouette. The distance between us is a mere ten meters, but the person keeps the silence that wraps over and above the sacred place. The person brings a hand to where the face would be, as if adjusting glasses, and finally I catch a glimpse of the man, staring at me as if I was some kind of statue.

“Oho. What business brings you to the chapel at this hour, Miss Ryōgi?” A fleeting smile plays across his face, a lazy, carefree expression reserved for children. It is the same smile he had worn two days before, but this place seems to give it an air of falsity somehow, and the smile rings hollow. There, in the dim, clouded light of the chapel, Satsuki Kurogiri stands alone.

## Records in Oblivion - VI

“Let me bring up the file on Satsuki Kurogiri.”

On his end of the line, I can clearly hear Mikiya tossing a thick stack of paper to a desk, and then getting a new one. Regrettable that he looked up so much, but I don’t think I’ll have any further use for any information he might have gleamed about Satsuki Kurogiri. With Hideo Hayama’s acts and the secret of class D now brought to light, I have nothing further to do. Whether Misaya Ōji would do anything or not, the case is Miss Tōko’s now.

“No, it’s fine, Mikiya. In all probability, me and Shiki will be departing the premises in short order. Just wait for me there in the office.”

“That so? Still, I don’t think it might be completely useless not to hear this stuff. After all, it might not be completely unrelated.”

Something about the tenor of his voice presses the weight of what he’s about to say. “What, is Satsuki Kurogiri involved in the prostitution ring as well?”

“Nah, this one’s a totally different thing. He’s got nothing to do with the class D incident. Azaka, do you know where the guy was born, by any chance?”

The name would probably automatically make you think he was Japanese, but I did hear he studied abroad for a long time. Maybe his parents were Japanese, but he wasn’t really born in Japan.

“I couldn’t say for sure,” I state. “But I have heard tell that he was in Britain for quite some time. Are you saying that that’s where his family stayed?”

“Yeah, it seems that he was born in some small town in Wales. He was put up

for adoption when he was ten years old, and he was given the name Satsuki Kurogiri by his new parents in place of his old name. Pretty weird that they'd change the name of a kid that old, too."

Not too strange, I should think, if his adoptive parents felt that it would bring them closer to their child. Though this is the first time I've ever heard of something like that, and of a child being placed for adoption at so late an age.

"Anyway, I did a little checking on him," he continues. "Apparently he was considered some kind of wunderkind way back when. Bright, full of talent. But he did something to make his parents hate him and put him up for adoption. It was a while before anyone actually adopted him, but apparently some Japanese national from a far-off city picked him up. Since he studied in schools there, what happened later is easy to find out with the paper trail, but before he became a kid for adoption, his history is fuzzy."

This is certainly a very strange story, and one that, on the surface at least, doesn't seem to fit Mr. Kurogiri. And more than that, the fact that Mikiya could actually find someone who knew about this portion of Mr. Kurogiri's past is quite a feat in itself. One has to wonder what sort of information network he tapped this time.

"I wonder why his parents would put their child up for adoption, even though he's some kind of genius," I muse. "Could it have been money problems?"

"There's the rub, isn't it? To be precise, he was only a genius until he was ten years old. After that, he somehow lost it. I couldn't find out if it was because of some mental damage or something, but what happened was that when he was ten years old, he became unable to remember things. Anything he saw, he couldn't remember, and for a while he was almost considered mentally retarded. And when that happened, his parents couldn't put him up for adoption fast enough."

"He couldn't...remember?" Something in there rings similar to the rash of memory problems that Reien has been experiencing of late. "But I didn't get that from him. He seems to remember what he experiences now, and he's a fairly well-read man."

"Well, I'd imagine. He wouldn't have even gotten a teacher's license otherwise. It was probably some kind of miracle, though. He got his genius back

at some point after he was adopted. When he was fourteen, he got into a university program, and eventually earned a doctorate in linguistics by the time he was in his early twenties. It was looking good for him. He chose a career in academia, and was employed in a lot of universities and colleges. There's something strange about that, though. There would always be a suicide—”

“—in the school, from one of the students, right?” I say, suddenly getting it.

“I know it isn’t such a special thing for kids to commit suicide in schools these days. But there’s the pattern. Every time Satsuki Kurogiri is employed by a school, and then leaves, there’s always some kind of student suicide. Now, far be it from me to establish a causal link, but I’m just telling you what I see. A coincidence like that in ten or twelve different institutions? Can’t be, right?”

His words send my thoughts racing. A professor leaving a trail of grisly suicides in his wake. Could he actually be related to the events unfolding now? But Misaya Ōji said that he was being manipulated like a tool. He lost memories as well, and was led to believe that nothing was truly out of place in class D. I thought the mastermind of all this was Misaya Ōji. What did this man do? How deep in this was he?

“Anyway, that’s all the stuff I got,” Mikiya concludes. “The rest of the legwork is on you. Don’t overwork yourself now. And try not to get separated from Shiki.” I open my mouth to respond, but he interrupts me before I can begin. “Oh wait, one last thing. I heard something about Satsuki’s name. Apparently the name ‘Satsuki’ is supposed to be some kind of weird translation of the word Mayday. I don’t really know what that is, though.”

But I do. May Day is the first day of May, and also the day of the Beltane festival that celebrates the coming of the summer sun. And Satsuki is the name of the fifth month in the Japanese lunar calendar. In that context, the name Satsuki does make sense. May Day or Beltane aren’t exactly widely celebrated holidays in Japan, but I know something of their significance. And if I’m right—

“Mikiya, do you know what happened to Mr. Kurogiri that temporarily removed his mental proficiency?”

“If rumors count, then yeah, but take from them what you will. The rumors about him was that he was taken, or replaced, or something like that. Apparently

he disappeared from home for three whole days. When he came back, he'd already changed.”

“Replaced, and then changed. His name is fairly suspicious for this kind of thing. Like Halloween and the summer solstice, May Day is supposed to be a time when the fairies come out to hunt, and when seeing them is common, and that's exactly when it happened to him. Thank you, Mikiya. I'll talk to you soon.”

I put the receiver back on the phone quickly, not sparing any more second than I have to for my goodbye. Mikiya was right. This information was relevant.

Miss Tōko’s last words before I left echo back to me now. *Commanding fairies as familiars is a fool’s game. It’s only a matter of time before they are no longer fulfilling your wishes, but turn you into fulfilling theirs. Be wary of these familiars foreign to the mage’s soul, Azaka. They can just as easily turn you into their own chattel.*

Foolishly, in my rush to find the culprit, and find out what class D was truly hiding, I’d missed the basic questions that I still lacked. The reason Kaori Tachibana was driven to suicide in the first place, for example, which Mikiya had handily supplied.

Misaya Ōji had said that the fairies only make away with memories still alive in one’s mind, but never the forgotten records and emanations of such memories. But who drew these records from oblivion and gave them form through the letters that circulated with the students? And given the new knowledge that Mikiya generously shared, that question now begs another fundamental mystery which I had forgotten.

Who had taught Misaya Ōji how to manipulate her Art?

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“Thank you, Mikiya. I’ll talk to you soon.” Having left Mikiya with just that little bit of pensiveness, the phone immediately cuts off.

“Azaka?” Mikiya tries to ask, but he knows an answer isn’t forthcoming. He shakes his head in disappointment as he puts the phone receiver back in its place. He gets the feeling that this is terribly more complicated than he’s been led to believe, and he just doesn’t know about it. He returns to take a seat behind his desk.

It’s January 6, just after midday, and no one else is present in Tōko Aozaki’s office save for himself. Tōko herself is out on her own excursion, but Mikiya was supposed to be on leave today anyway, so his being here is not entirely proper. But of course, since his sister, Azaka Kokutō, and his friend, Shiki Ryōgi, are tangled up in some new case, he has to be here and keep watch on the phone. Not for the first time today, he worries at why those two should have tackled a case so early in the year.

He hasn’t the vaguest idea what the case is even really about, or any word if it’s safe for the both of them. He didn’t really ask anyone outright if the two were going on another investigation, but a terribly annoyed Shiki only mouthed it off the day after New Year, seemingly without any regard to any kind of secrecy Azaka had made her swear to. Then that was that. According to her, she was supposed to pose as some kind of prospective new student in Reien, which would be their cover story to investigate the place. It was only a few days after that when Shiki called from Reien and asked him to look up Hideo Hayama and Satsuki Kurogiri.

Mikiya first heard about the dormitory fire in Reien in October last year, and it was from that point that he started developing the curiosity to look into it, but he’d only assembled any coherent set of documents from the thing today, which, combined with his fretting over his sister’s safety of course meant that he hadn’t really had a wink of sleep.

“Well, I guess as long as she’s near Shiki, she’s relatively safe,” he says to himself as he stretches his arms out above him. So what should he do now, then? Sleep is starting to sound like a really good idea. And just as he thinks it might not be the right time for him to sleep when Azaka might call back at any moment, he finds his eyelids heavier than he had anticipated and quickly falls into deep slumber.

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A dream takes Mikiya back to a moment only a few days ago, after New Year. Shiki had shown him the uniform Azaka had expected her to wear going into Reien. Outraged at how ridiculous she thought it looked on herself, she dragged him along with her to complain to Tōko, who, upon seeing it, only said one thing.

“Splendid.”

Whatever was so splendid about it seemed to escape Mikiya, and obviously Shiki as well. She had made it a point never to show herself to him wearing that again until she left.

“You’ll catch a cold sleeping on that desk, Kokutō.”

“I’m awake!” Mikiya responds reflexively, instantly waking himself and looking around the room at who had just said that. He spots the wall clock first, though, which shows the time at three in the afternoon. As soon as the fact that he had just spent two hours sleeping on his own desk dawns on him, Mikiya suddenly feels much colder. It was his own fault to start sleeping here lacking any sort of heating at the height of winter.

“Miss Tōko?” he says, finally laying his sleepy eyes on the woman walking across the room. “When did you get back?”

Tōko Aozaki, still in her trench coat and with a cigarette pressed between her lips, stops beside Mikiya. “Just now,” she answers. Her long face looks like she’s starved for any kind of entertainment. It looks as if today’s date with cousin Daisuke ended on some note of failure.

“You seem bored, ma’am.” Mikiya smiles, thinking he can get away with a few snide observations with Tōko looking the way she does. But her answer is contrary to what Mikiya is expecting.

“No, not bored really. He was kind of dull, but I wasn’t bored by him or anything.” And that is the only assessment she gives of how the day went before

reaching into her coat pocket and bringing out a can of coffee and placing it on top of Mikiya's desk with a comment. "Little present I got you for watching the office."

*An...economical present,* Mikiya thinks, but one that he is nevertheless grateful for thanks to the coldness that took over his body while he slept. He manages a small thank you before he quickly breaks open the can's tab. Tōko suddenly spots the thick stack of documents placed on top of Mikiya's desk and grabs one of them while wearing an even more bored look on her face.

"Oh, those are just some stuff Shiki asked me to look up about some of the faculty in Reien. I don't think you'll find it riveting literature." "Probably not," responds Tōko with a nod, but still she starts to flip through the pages. For a few seconds, she retains the uninterested look on her face, but stops right at the page with Satsuki Kurogiri's photograph stapled to it.

"Godword." Her voice is a surprised whisper, and after she speaks that word, her mouth remains ajar enough to let the cigarette previously affixed to her mouth to fall to the floor. Her eyes suddenly open like she's seen a ghost. "I can't believe it," she finally mutters. "The spell weaver that the Ordo Magi have run themselves ragged trying to hunt down is posing as a high school instructor, here? This must be some kind of joke for the Master of Babel."

She takes on the ragged smile of any person who knows that she stands to lose as much as she can gain, a smile lacking in scorn but with plenty of the potent mixture of dry caution and calculated risk of the next precipitous choice.

"Satsuki Kurogiri? A mage?" Mikiya asks, incredulous. Tōko gives him a quick glance before going back to reading the document intently. Still wearing her madly unleashed grin, she takes her seat behind her own desk. "The Mother Superior didn't bring along a photo with her request. Leaving this one to Azaka might have been a mistake. I could have...no. If I'd went, my memories would only have been stolen."

Not understanding what Tōko's halting words mean, Mikiya can only shrug, concluding only that she referred to stolen memories as probably one of her more colorful and obscure metaphors. Still, from what he can gather, this man seems to have been more dangerous than Tōko had originally anticipated, and it

inspires more questions from him.

“If this guy is really a mage, then Shiki and Azaka have their necks on the line being so close to him. Miss Tōko, I need to know if he poses any danger to either of them.”

“Not likely. If the rumors are true, Godword doesn’t plan on harming anyone, at least not intentionally. He is no mage, for one. He hails from no dynasty of magic, nor does his soul bear the lucky spark that animates the Arts of a few lucky individuals, such as Azaka. But just as Azaka can do no more than control the flames, his one particular gimmick is the command over language. It seems to be an ability outside of what is documented in the Arts of the magi dynasties, but he claimed it when he was but ten years of age.

“My mastery of the arcana of the Runes at twenty years of age is often considered early, but there have been those who reached it earlier. One of those individuals, a man who studied in the Collegium of the African Atlas Mountains, I have not personally met, though all Collegium know his names and titles. The Master of Babel, Godword Mayday. The only weaver of an Art so potent and ancient, it borders on mythic sorcery.”

She snickers, as though she was suddenly privy to some cosmic secret. Mikiya knows that she is spinning the words as much for herself as for him, and somehow, that makes it all the more unsettling.

“No one truly knows what Godword’s real name is, and even those who knew him in his Collegium are limited. Few ever see him in person. But his face and magic are known to all who claim allegiance to the traditions of the London Ordo Magi. You see, Godword’s Art is fairly obvious to derive from his title: he speaks the high speech, the mythic Adamic language. The words still hold power over reality, and they tap a consciousness embedded in every human being, rendering it comprehensible by anyone. There is no word he does not know, no dialect he is not privy to. Though he hears himself as only speaking one single language, anyone who hears him hear it how their paradigm manipulates them to. Even you must know the story of the Tower of Babel, Kokutō.”

“Yeah, the same thing that Pieter Brueghel painted, right? A tall, spiral tower almost reaching heaven, where they planned to build a temple on top so that God

could talk to them easier. But God saw that as hubris and struck down the tower, and so men could never repeat the same thing, he created the confusion of tongues which scattered people all over the Earth.”

“Indeed. The old Babel story from the Bible. Other extant sources point to similar stories, and there is always what they call the ‘confusion of tongues.’ God made to scatter humanity, but not through the complex physicality of skin or race, but through simple language. After all, the largest difference you notice between Japanese and foreigners isn’t the color of the hair or the eyes, but simply the constructions of our grammar and words, correct? It forms a continual barrier of understanding. The reasoning of God goes that because of this barrier, mankind will never again build such a towering edifice. But over time, mankind grew, and prospered, and globalized, and eventually, the barrier of language became somewhat lax.

“What now for the confusion of tongues? Such a judgment was made in the time when humanity still felt their gods, in the mythic ages. This was a time when our mysteries were not yet mysteries, and the Art was the consensus, and therefore common, and when mighty sorcerers wielded great powers from the occult phases of the moon, and the jealous tides of stars, which made the world overflow with mana. So it was taught to us, at any rate. Godword is a constant reminder of this. Before the confusion of tongues, there was but one, formless, high speech, through which everyone understood all, and when men spoke to the anima mundi and its creatures as surely as they did each other. Then God gave us the debased tongues, stealing from us the promise of wisdom he had once so readily granted. Godword is the only known one able to reproduce this universal language, and work his Art through the high speech. He communicates to all men, a channel through which that demiurgic force, that ultimate origin passes through. That his lack of talent for magehood prevents him from truly using it dangerously is a blessing for us.”

In contrast to Tōko’s sinister smile, Mikiya sports a troubled and confused look. He doesn’t know if he truly understands what Tōko is trying to say, seeing as she has forgotten, yet again, that he isn’t privy to the mystical aspects of her trade. Still, he knows enough to parse it in something that his mind can understand.

“So in other words, Satsuki Kurogiri can speak to anything?” he asks. “Mostly. The universal language is not as universal as it once was, and though he can speak to a beast, and it will understand him, the beast cannot convey his thoughts in the same way. People will also return to him the language that they speak.”

“So what’s so special about that? If they can’t talk back to him, isn’t he just kind of talking to himself?”

“If the medium of words is used, yes. But the man is different. He speaks not truly to men and beast, but to the soul in them that still contains that last connection to something higher. There is always a part of us that is culled from that primeval spiral of origin, and when the high speech speaks to the soul, our fallen selves are compelled to obey. To deny it is to ontologically deny the very structure of reality, and thus impossible. An absolute language, that starts from statement and then proceeds to become truth. It is the ultimate form of hypnotism. He accesses the Akashic Record unconsciously, and through the high speech, taps into it to channel his will. It’s how he draws forth the memory, not from your mind, but from the Record of things past that reality still contains. Truly a spell worth the Academia Seal that’s been granted to him.”

Tōko leans back heavily on her seat with a heavy sigh, and Mikiya wonders if she is finally satisfied.

The Academia Seal. A mark of recognition and uniqueness that the Ordo gives to mages or spellworkers that have a talent so rare it hasn’t been seen before, or indeed, is not expected to be seen again. For the preservation of these abilities, they seek to contain these individuals. Though the Ordo considers it a high honor, the affected party hardly ever thinks so, since his use is now eternally as a subject of study. Mages trapped in this way have no more opportunity for study, no more time for the quest for ascension that defines every mage. Thus, most mages marked with the Academia Seal make haste to separate themselves from the Ordo, and Godword is one of a number of such apostates. If the Ordo knew about Godword being here, it would only be a short while before he is eventually caught. But Tōko Aozaki cannot resort to this measure. Will not. She had risked her independence and owed the Ordo after that incident with the Ōgawa Apartments in November, and she was not so keen to do the same thing again.

She stares up at the ceiling blankly and thinks. As long as Godword is in

Reien, Shiki and Azaka are always in some measure of danger. Still, Azaka was the one looking for a showdown, and she would never forgive Tōko for denying her this opportunity.

“It’s the benches for us for now, Kokutō. I don’t think it’ll be anything serious anyway.” She declares with finality as she finally slips a new cigarette into her mouth and lights it. Mikiya looks at her with an eyebrow raised.

“Are you sure? If I understand what you’re saying, which might not be in the realm of impossibility, Satsuki Kurogiri sounds fairly dangerous. You’re really not going there to help, ma’am?”

“I already told you he’s not the one to harm anybody. His Art isn’t even polished enough for him to use it as any kind of attack. His isn’t the kind of Art that Shiki and Azaka cultivate. He can only make other people’s desires come to fruition. And he’s only here for that vaguely defined goal that he always seems to chase after.”

“Which is?” The simplicity of Kokutō’s question makes Tōko think back on when she assigned this case to Azaka. The incident of forgotten memories, lost to oblivion, does indeed sound like the handiwork of Godword in retrospect. But what’s done is done. Who was to suspect that one of the Ordo’s best sport would be hiding himself in an academy in a backwater province?

“It’s a goal that’s fairly simple, inconsequential even. It’s...well...I suppose you could call it eternity. As long as he has that power, he’ll always chase after shadows incomprehensible to us, but valuable to him. It’s like a bittersweet mirage to him, and the chase will last a lifetime and more.” She takes a long drag from her cigarette, and then breathes out the thick gray smoke. “He’ll never get it, though. Even though he can find eternity everywhere he looks.”

The smoke from the cigarette wafts toward the ceiling, catching the light in a hazy pattern that tells of some obfuscated mirage.

The ashen tint of sunlight, filtered through the myriad colors of the stained glass windows, grant the chapel interior a sort of delirious quality that touches over everything; over me, and over Satsuki Kurogiri, standing there at the center of it all with that silly smile on his face, looking straight at me without any truly lingering good or ill-will.

“Oho. What business brings you to the chapel at this hour, Miss Ryōgi?” His tone is not to fault me towards my brazen entry of the place, but a plain question, which makes it all the more suspicious. For a moment when I entered, I thought it was Mikiya standing there beside the altar, and it was enough to bring an awkward stop to my feet. But I regained my senses in time to pull the knife from the back pocket of the uniform, and have it at the ready at my side by the time we had faced each other. Now he looks darkly at the fine, scalpel-like blade, perhaps not knowing what to make of it.

“Best put that away,” he says. “You could hurt somebody with that.” Said with all the grace of an instructor gently guiding his pupil. I ignore him, still scanning the chapel for signs of any other presence, but though the place is darkened, I can’t place any suspicious shadow or glint. The female student that I had chased here doesn’t seem to be present, and no one else is visible save for Satsuki Kurogiri himself.

“Would you happen to know where Misaya Ōji is, sir?” I say, stopping my survey of the place and looking back on the man standing before the altar. Satsuki Kurogiri’s eyes softly cast themselves downwards.

“Miss Ōji is not here. But it is me you are looking for, is it not? Because it is me collecting the pieces of scattered oblivion in this school, not her.” He smiles again as he says it. Somehow, I easily believe it is no lie. He’s the culprit, the real one, and it is a truth that is so easy to accept without mystery or reservation. Somehow. It almost feels like a given truth, long known and strangely compelling.

“What the hell does that mean?” Well, so much for the gentle student façade. Though I think at this point, its usefulness has long past. I stare at Satsuki Kurogiri sharply, and he welcomes it with a fittingly guilty chuckle.

“It means what it means. I am the one you’ve been seeking, though I admit the fae you killed is not mine. You are still a blank slate to Misaya Ōji, and she has some interest in you. Her false fae can do little of value to you, yet she insists on facing you with it. Though it is nothing more than something willed into being with her Art, it is still regrettable that one had to die.”

Again, the grief in his voice seems genuine, even as he closes his eyes in seeming prayer for that departed thing. Still, I shouldn’t allow myself to be swayed by such a stupid display of compassion. Azaka has gone on and on about our observational role here, but with the enemy clear before me, there seems but one thing left to do. I’ll—

“I think not, Miss Ryōgi,” he suddenly says, as if my mind was open to him. “The mage of the fae familiars is not me, but Miss Ōji. In the first place, it would be patently impossible for my skill in the Art to command such an impressive number of familiars. The only one here capable of such a feat is Miss Ōji. My talent lies only in the recording of words and thoughts spoken, and thus, my role in this has little connection to the fae. And you will not think me an enemy in that regard.”

“Wha—” Again, his words have a strange ring to them.

“That having been said, it does not mean I have no connection to the whole drama in general. Perhaps it would be appropriate for me to raise Misaya Ōji up from her little failure this time, wouldn’t you agree?” His eyes finally open again, and when I look into them, they have within them some unchanging peace. “I did not intend to be as involved as I am in this affair, but I didn’t count

on you entering the stage so early either. Miss Ōji was only to probe Miss Kokutō's capabilities, but I suppose when I revealed my hand, it was only a matter of time before your master sent you along as well. Seeing as I drew you out, it would probably be best that I be your opponent this time."

"Any reason you want to throw your life away so easily? Don't see any reason for you to step into my blade at such a ready attitude."

"Perhaps. I wonder what it is you feel about the memories you have locked away deep inside you. Do you refuse them as you refuse me, or do you want them back? The plundering of the memories was Miss Ōji's role, and mine was the drawing out of memories lost to oblivion. Both of you chase Miss Ōji, thinking to end this confusion, and yet here you find me, with a hand ready to grant what it is you might wish most fervently for."

I don't move. I don't even blink. There is some truth to what he says. I don't think that having my hands back on the lost memories would be anywhere close to my liking. So far, my somewhat overzealous reaction to the fairies has probably been due to this, and why I've been so hard up for finally getting rid of Misaya Ōji one way or the other. Though the target's changed to Satsuki Kurogiri, little about what I feel has changed.

But there is none of that familiar feeling, none of that impulse telling me to take a step forward. No sense of danger emanating from this person before me. Odd. I know he's the enemy, but I remain unimpressed. And as soon as I notice that strangely foreign feeling, I feel a cold chill down my spine. But it is still not that crisp clarity of purpose that tells me to kill. Maybe...maybe I don't really need it.

ignore the chill in the small of my back, and I use the Eyes to take a clear look at Satsuki Kurogiri and his weird-ass smile. And with the weaving of the spell, the black lines of death come into view, tracing themselves all over his body like the calculated positioning of a spider web pattern, twining into itself with the complexity of a fractal. The sheer number of them only tells me that his is a body already prone to death, more so than anyone else I've ever witnessed. As the crazed ash tints of the sunlight and the darkened, electrified crackle of the lines of death intermix, Satsuki Kurogiri still manages to make a faint, almost mocking chuckle.

“You’ve woven a spell. The Arcane Eyes of Death Perception, I presume. I claim the finite streams already travelled, but you see the infinite paths yet to be trodden. I record nothing but the past, and you see nothing but the future. Ironic that Alaya called me out here to deal with your past, eh, Miss *Shiki*?”

His eyes close halfway, seeming to glare at me suspiciously. But more important than the odd little ways in which he carries himself, only one word he said catches my complete and undivided attention, and even the mention of it goes some way to partially explain the mysterious brand of hostility that I have been feeling in my mind since I came in here.

Alaya. There is no doubt he said that name.

“Fuck. You’re a mage, too, aren’t you, Satsuki Kurogiri? *You are* my enemy, then.” I grasp my knife tightly. Then the strange thoughts intruding into my head ever since he started speaking were no coincidence. It’s his spell, no doubt.

Then there is little else to think about.

No more debate.

Killing him will make it all right again.

Killing him will end all of this.

And at the end of reason, though I do not see myself, I feel in myself the urge to laugh.

For a heartbeat, he looks much like Mikiya would. Another heartbeat, and I remember that he is a mage, on the same side of the boundary as I am, separated from the teeming masses, but together with me in the world of secrets and lies. I keep myself from leaping with reckless abandon, from attacking to tear his throat and taste the still warm blood. There are methods for this, a bit of planning to not underestimate my opponent. As soon as there is an opening, I’ll pounce, close with him and stab him vertically through the base of his throat, drag the knife downwards to his belly in one bated breath and finish it all in an easy three seconds.

But in my mind’s eye, though I see the limbs scattered and bloodied, I hear

another heartbeat. And then there is tension. My breathing quickly becomes ragged, and my hesitation is clear.

“That is not what you will do, Miss *Shiki*,” the mage says with an air of authority as if to emphasize a point. I should be at him by now, making him regret those words. But instead, they somehow hold me in place, preventing me from performing an action that something inside me tells me is purely *wrong*, even as my mind says everything about it is right. The murderous urge I usually ride isn’t coming for me, and I can’t bring myself to attack him, this man who looks so much like Mikiya.

My throat dries, my tongue begins to numb, and it is all I can do to try and fight it, preventing the fear from manifesting, and push myself into final action. My body is unmoving, cadaverous in its paralysis. If only I could blank my mind, I know I can dispose of these useless thoughts and move. But I’m not.

“No, I can’t.” The only thing which, with some difficulty, I manage to say. The mage looks me over like a towering watchman.

“Good. You’ve stopped. You would have killed me if you had continued on like you did. Once, you killed the murderous impulse inside you named *Shiki* over and over again to grant yourself the illusion of a normal life. Now you find yourself trying to silence *Shiki*, and wanting to lean on the shadow of that same voided part of yourself. But silence *Shiki*, and you will return to the outer darkness from which you awakened from. Hmph. Alaya said to me that you were brash, impulsive. But all I see before me now is a cowardly child without resolve.” His eyes wander away from mine. “Alaya told me all about you, relied on me to draw you out. It is the worst kind of comedy of errors that puts me here even as the man himself has already been defeated. A shame. I had wanted to see what he could do with his experiment.”

Some seconds pass with him saying nothing, and he stands in front of me, unblinking and unmoving like me, with no motion to run or attack. The lines of death dance in anticipation, and my knife is still firmly in my hand, its heat asking me how long I plan to stand and face him like this. I can give it no answer. In the silence that falls over the chapel, only my own wild heartbeats echo in my ear like a tolling bell, and it is not slowing down. Unable to bring myself to attack, or indeed, even to quell my rapid heartbeat, I decide to

ask.ç“Why are you just standing there, Satsuki Kurogiri?”

“The things that must be said have been said, and anything I say further will be answers to your questions. That is how it goes, doesn’t it? If you leave all this now, ignoring the strange paths that fate has brought together for us, then I will leave you, unrelated as before. Decide to fight, and I will defend myself. I owed Miss Ōji my help once, and that is finished now. I will do nothing now except to abide by your desire.”

My eyebrows twitch at his peculiar reply. What does he mean when he puts the choice to me? Is his heart not in this fight? Then why did he even trap me like this?

“So you’ll do what I want then? Fine. I never wanted those lost memories returned anyway.” My heartbeat races even faster as I say this, and I manage to put a hand over my chest to try and stop the pain. The mage looks at it curiously before shaking his head in a negative.

“That is not what your heart is saying. You’ve sought those long forgotten memories for so long, and your heart here speaks the truth. It is to that answer that I will abide.”

Goddamit. He’s...not lying. But I only ever wanted **Shiki’s** memories. The warm but painful memories of that old classmate. But never that one last memory. Not that last memory in the freezing night, with raindrops as cold as ice daggers on my skin—

“No. Don’t do it, Kurogiri,” I say, an unexpected desperation creeping into my own voice. “I don’t want them back. I never...I just want to forget all about it, alright? That’s what I want!” I mean, isn’t that why I forgot about that night? Isn’t that why **Shiki** died and left only the worthless fringe vestiges of that memory as a mark of his passing? I’d always thought the memories would never return. He killed himself so I could be here, now. “I don’t need your help.” Inadvertently, I find that I say it with a crack in my voice.

There is a small silence before a grin rises to his face and he answers. “My mistake, perhaps. If that is your wish, then it will be granted. That is the role I play.” In his words I can find no malice or anger, no virtue and wellness.

Tōko told me about the fae once before I left, about how their tricks were not

bound by our notions of morality. Only the impersonality of action, as if compelled by some spiritual tell or obscure ban. This mage, with his deliberate fickleness of mind and the arbitrary nature of his gathering of memories, strike me almost as fae. Why then does the man smile? Would it be more right for him not to?

“You’re fucking weird, you know that? Even though you say you can only follow what I want, I don’t know why the hell you’re smiling like you’re so satisfied. I never wanted a smile. If you’re so intent on being a mirror for what I want, then you can wipe that smug grin off your face.”

“You are correct. However, I don’t believe I am smiling right now. As I’ve told you before, I have never smiled.” Though he says this, the smile never leaves his face. “Everyone seems to see it that way, though. I seek to carry myself normally, but Satsuki Kurogiri is ever the smiler. I’ve never felt myself smile, Miss Shiki. Never even thought of it. I don’t understand its merit, or why people do it. Joy never comes easily to a man like me, and in that regard, I was similar to you, who once never felt truly alive. But time seems to have settled that matter for you, hasn’t it? Shiki Ryōgi has a future, a purpose. As for me, I have nothing else save the past, and it is all I see within others. Just as other people need to consume something to live, I am compelled to gather the past and reveal it. What happens after is of little concern. It is all up to the person himself to judge what to do with such memories, because I certainly cannot judge. It is not in my nature to.”

The smile he wears seems to weaken somewhat, but it seems no less real than before.

“Nothing else save the past? What does that mean?”

“To have no past is to be nothing but a blank. Regrettably, my nature is weak, bound to old, eldritch fae. I cannot think for myself, and thus have no dreams or aspirations. I am like a book, written with meaning by a writer, but imprinted with the desires and meanings of the multitudes who read it. The same weakness makes me recoil from suicide, and I have no choice except to live. Only one thing ties me to some semblance of identity. The granting of people’s wishes. I don’t do it to find good in myself, yet I am compelled to. Like fate, I respond to the desires of men. I bring back forgotten time. Isn’t this clearly a desirable

outcome, Miss Shiki? I only return what is rightfully yours.”

“For you, maybe. But you just said it wasn’t for you to judge.” I narrow my eyes at him. I make my show of defiance, but inside me there is a strange ring to his words. It’s almost as if they’re not stopping in my mind, but continue to course throughout my body. Like the force that he says compels him also compels me to give weight to his words above anyone else’s. “Thanks for the offer, but the answer is still no. You don’t need to send me a letter telling me what I already know. Lost memories don’t come back. All that proselytizing isn’t going to change me.”

My heart throbs inside my chest and the hand held against it. For the first time, our eyes meet, but his own looks at something farther, a hollow black that speaks of some long held farewell.

“So even you are among those who would renounce their past. I simply cannot understand how you, all of you, come to this decision. Why would you renounce eternity so easily?”

“Eternity? Making people remember old sins and recording them is eternity to you? Hilarious, is what it is. Where do you get off spouting things like that? I mean, if people really wanted to preserve memories, let them do it with a camera. Unlike mages, they never lie.” The rhetoric seems to finally pull down the smile from Satsuki Kurogiri’s face for the first time, and when he speaks again, his voice has the seed of some conviction, however small.

“‘What is material cannot in eternity lie.’ An old truth, but still just as correct. The stuff of this material world is not everlasting. Your Eyes tell you that better than most. Anything must have an observer to give it meaning, and the impression itself must not deviate, else it is not eternity. Even you cannot tell exactly if what you saw in one day matches exactly as you remember it. The observer’s mind is simple, and heuristic. The new becomes old, and the color of wonder fades. In our minds, the value of anything is variable and ever-changing. Entropy is more relentless than eternity, and we are always tied to it. Eternity comes in no shape, no form, an intent controlled by its beholder that can never deviate. Only the record of things transpired—an accurate, omniscient record—can be such a thing.”

“Records can be changed,” I reply sternly. “This whole incident proves that. I don’t think you can find your oh-so-precious ‘eternity’ anywhere you care to look.”

“Those are not records. Merely fleeting memories. Such things form only the base personalities of men, and like memories, they too change to fit an occasion, becoming little more than a dress one wears. You should know this. The flesh and the mind can be molded just as easily as you change your manner of speaking.” The mage takes a step toward me, and it causes my heart to jump. “The observer observes himself, and in turn is changed by it, identity preserved only by the cognizance of the weight of time. There is no such thing as a definitive personality. The records are the only seed of a soul that has ever existed, and its watch over eternity is stern. It is the scar that remains inside you even after yourself and the universe has crumbled under the passage of strange aeons, ever unchanging.”

“I have literally no idea what you’re getting at.”

“Nor did I expect you to. You and all else like you cannot understand. You never get it. There is no memory that deserves to be abandoned. Whether unconsciously or not, you all wish for the records from oblivion. I merely reflect this truth back.”

Another step forward from him, bringing him farther from the altar. His awkward smile returns as he draws near. The heat of my grip on the knife has my palm in a sweat, but it is a familiar and comforting warmth. His meaningless tirade held only one important conclusion. This man was never like Mikiya. He never had a pace so careless and indifferent. That difference is all I can hold on to, trying to banish the unusual effect his words have on me, even for a moment. A moment is all I need. It takes a great exertion of mental effort, but I feel my heartbeat relaxing, the numbness in my fingers starting to disappear. The effort strains me, and I know it is only temporary, but it’s all I’ve got.

“You say you’re not trying to find good in yourself,” I say casually, trying to will away the strain this is causing me, to maintain the illusion just a little while longer, letting him come closer. “Well, I can’t rightly say you’re evil or anything, just like you can’t call a mirror evil.”

That was a patented lie. He makes himself out to have no choice, but clearly Satsuki Kurogiri has the intelligence to weigh his actions. And even then he has the gall to call himself harmless.

“And that’s what you think of yourself, am I right?” I continue. “A mirror. So you can pretend that you’re not doing anything wrong. You’re just doing what you do. But you know what you resemble more? The way you push the responsibility to other people reminds me of some spoiled kid.”

At this, his eyes gain a mad, almost fassoristic gleam. “You *want* to fight me, don’t you Miss Shiki?” A cruelly twisted smile. “Then let us do so. It will honor Alaya’s role for me. It would have been so much better if you actually chose to just ignore me, though.”

The mage adjusts his glasses slightly and dares himself another curious step, the one step that puts him just in reach of one burst of speed, one strike of the blade. Adjusting his glasses in front of me was the biggest and last mistake he’ll make.

The mental block still makes moving difficult, but I manage to pump strength into my legs to close the distance, raise my hand—

“*Your sight is lost.*”

I hear his voice for a split second, and in that vital moment, it echoes in my mind like an undeniable truth. The next thing I know, I see neither hide nor hair of Satsuki Kurogiri, and my knife swings only at empty air. “What the—” I swing my head around, left then right then behind me. The chapel is empty save for me, and my senses, mundane or otherwise, fail to find my target.

He was right in front of me. But now he’s gone. But unbidden there comes a voice.

“Close. Very close. I do so hate people who interrupt other people before they’re done talking. That attack claimed an arm from me. Ah, it is no wonder now how Alaya was defeated. You are truly an excellent killer.” The voice comes from dead in front of me. The mental block he induced in my mind still presses down on me, and makes it difficult to focus the spell of my Eyes. I try to bring it to bear. If I can’t see him, then maybe I can see his lines of death.

“But you cannot win against me.” The voice enters my mind unbidden. But it’s useless. I’ve seen the lines of death, right in front of me.

“Found you, bastard,” I spit out. I close as fast as I can, before the advantage is lost, not planning on letting him get away. But before I can do anything of value, he is gone from my sight again.

“*Your Eyes will not avail you here.*”

The statement echoes confidently above and below the chapel, and darkness rapidly begins to curtain everything. Through his words, I am deprived of even the faintest light in moments, and become surrounded by a world of darkness.

“Hmph. The first tongue has less effect on you than I expected,” he grumbles. “The connection of both of our spells to the spiral of origin grants you some measure of resistance perhaps. But in the end, the death you cling so close to remains unseen. As does everything else.”

His words burrow inside my ear, as if he were right beside me. I swing my knife in a wide arc around me, left and right, but hit nothing except air and a random wooden surface, maybe a pew.

“A pointless exercise. I have already told you that you can’t win. You kill anything so easily, but you are brought low by simple words. Unfortunately, you are spared a fate of death today. That is not my role. And besides, in truth, I do not kill anyone. Not with words. But I can grant you what it is you truly desire.”

His last sentence makes me shudder faintly. My wish. The truth about me that I never wanted to know.

“No! Stop it! That’s never what I wanted!” I scream as loudly as I can, but the sounds are dead and fade into the darkness.

“Now, this lingering grief must be retrieved and returned to you. Do not worry. Though you think it lost to oblivion, the memory repeats itself like a record.”

The mage’s voice is the sound of a rhythm, as excellently plain as a musician’s metronome, and mathematically perfect. I feel the rhythm of that woven spell pierce deep inside me, and if I had a soul, it finds its terminus there. Unable to stop it, he reaches to my core, to *Shiki*, and all I can do is stare helplessly as his voice finds its passage, and I observe its work.

## **Records in Oblivion - VII**

I head immediately to the high school building after I get off the phone with Mikiya. The hour has just passed 1pm, but already the cloud-thick sky overhead is filled to bursting, the sun barely peeking out behind the leaden blanket.

“Rain is coming early today.” I whisper. The cold winter air mixes with the scent of the black pines in the forest and the coolness settles into my lungs when I breathe it in. I suspect, under normal circumstances, the odor would be enchanting, but now I can’t help but judge it as vaguely unsettling. A few minutes later, I am glad to be out of the forest path and into the high school building.

I walk the corridors, meeting no one else, the building’s desolation granting it a desolate loneliness. Nothing moves as I traverse the building, making my way to the English instructor’s classroom. When I arrive, I do not bother to knock, simply opening the door to find Mr. Kurogiri sitting in his chair facing the door and me, as if he was waiting, as if he knew everything. He is smiling as though everything were normal, unsurprised by my unannounced appearance.

My eyes wander to his left arm, hanging lazily like dead weight still tethered to his body.

In an instant, I know exactly who is responsible for it.

“Shiki did that to you, didn’t she, sir?”

“Yes.” Satsuki Kurogiri nods. “In appreciation of her skill in destroying my arm, I let her go freely. Miss Shiki is unharmed. She should be awake within the hour. I cannot say the same for this arm, though.”

With the ashen sunlight spilling through from the window behind him, Satsuki Kurogiri has some illusory, dreamlike mien, and the manner with which he is at peace is in itself disturbing. I hold my breath for only a second, and then exhale, deciding to ask the questions I have been tempted to ask.

“It was you who troubled Kaori Tachibana, wasn’t it, sir?”

“Yes.” Satsuki Kurogiri nods.

“And the one who made Hideo Hayama disappear...”

“Yes.” The instructor nods.

“And the one who granted Miss Ōji her Art...”

“Yes.” The mage nods.

“And the one collecting all our forgotten memories...”

“Yes.” The man nods.

“So the story about you being taken by the fairies is true then.”

“Yes,” he nods with a smile.

“But why?” It is the only question I can put to words. “Why you?” The second question comes more clumsily than the first.

The eyes behind the glasses do not twitch one bit, or darken as he leans slightly forward. “It wasn’t for me to put a purpose behind it. Whether it be Miss Tachibana, or Miss Ōji, or Mr. Hayama, the only thing I did is grant their true desires. As for why they wished such things, you had best ask them yourself. I can’t answer.”

Somehow, I know he speaks truth. The answers aren’t for him to give. When Kaori Tachibana, in desperation, turned to Satsuki Kurogiri for advice, he showed her a way out of it all that could only have come from someone like her. The choice of salvation by suicide was hers alone. When Misaya Ōji, in anger, shared her desire to recompense Kaori’s death, he showed her the means to punish class D by terrorizing them into terrified inaction, a means that could only have come from her. The choice to learn magic from him was hers alone.

All seemed pure. None of it contained the ulterior motive one would suspect of

a mage.

“But gathering memories seems out of place for all this. All the things you made people remember, none of them truly wanted.”

“Is that so? And why do you think that, Miss Kokutō?” The lilt in his voice contains little suspicion, as though the question was sprung out of pure curiosity. All of this is the epitome of strange. I’d come to this room expecting to finally confront the man behind the black curtain of madness enveloping the school, but here stands Satsuki Kurogiri asking me a question as though we had never left a classroom, him still the instructor, and I still an eager student.

“Because I certainly never wished for mine to be taken away.” I decide to answer him squarely.

“Maybe. But you do not even remember the memory, so how could you have even thought of it? It sounds suspiciously similar to my situation, Miss Kokutō.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“It’s very simple, really. I am compelled to seek out memories so that I can better understand people better. There really is no other way for me to comprehend people other than reading the record. It is why I collect the memories lost to oblivion.”

He speaks as if talking of some long past event, and the way he leans his head on his hands puts a pensive silhouette against the gray sunlight. His eyes that lack any sort of emotion stare at me with a curious judgment, and I try my best to return the favor.

“I am seeking a less vague reason, sir. For example, the reason why you begun to collect the memories in the first place. Don’t you only seek out your own past?”

Immediately, Mikiya’s detailed report comes back to mind. I remember the little detail about how Satsuki Kurogiri, at ten years of age, was supposedly kidnapped by fairies. Upon hearing the question, the man lets slip a low hum which I take for an impression of admiration.

“You surprise me, Miss Kokutō. You have done your research well, it looks like. Yes, it as you imply. I had a run-in with the fae in my youth. After that

incident, memories have become difficult to place. The best medical science had to offer couldn't help, but the glamour that the fae influence granted me eventually expressed itself in the Art, and I thought that it could help me where the world couldn't. So I tried to learn the Art in a bid to reclaim my forgotten memories. If it weren't for that incident, I wouldn't have needed to do all of this."

Far from anger, his speech is one of repentance and regret.

"Then why?"

"I have told you. Whatever eldritch magic the fae forced on my mind compels me to do so. I've learned so much about the Art, but I am still a riddle to myself. The mind never truly forgets, but only in intact minds. But my memories are not simply lost to some temporary oblivion, but damaged and fragmented. There is only one last way to reclaim them, and that is to read the records of the pattern of reality; all the memories, one person at a time. Fortunately, the fae glamour granted me an ability that could allow me the freedom to pursue that. But it is fast becoming fruitless. No one can tell me anything about myself. And it separates me from the rest of humanity. So I have no choice except to feed on the memories of myself that people make, their own personal interpretations of me. That this requires me to tap into the spiral of origin, the final goal of all mages, is fortunate, and through it, I can see inside you for what you are, and hopefully find something to put inside of me."

"And you do it by tapping into the Akashic Record?" I shake my head in disdain as I say it. When Miss Tōko first told me about the Akashic Record, the origin of everything, it seemed such a nebulous concept that I couldn't bring myself to believe it. The fact that she had tried but failed to reach it had only served to help my stance. A collective record of all that has happened, and will happen, given metaphysical being by the combined consensus of all humanity, pursued by mages in a quest for ascension seemingly designed to make them solitary creatures.

"But sir, if you can do that, can you not find your own past there?" My voice weakens, as if it carries not only my words but this man's own end. However, he shifts his smile only ever so slightly, in a manner of observing some kind of cosmic amusement.

“It is a certainty that I could. But I don’t. I’d much rather construct myself from something new, such as the memories of other people. Tell me, Miss Kokutō. Why do people forget?”

The sudden question forces a gulp in my throat. I hesitate to answer at first, and then, “Because there’s a limit to how much our brain can recall at haste. There are memories that need to be recovered faster than others, and with the passage of time, the memories we don’t need only grow larger. We need it, to bring a semblance of order to our perception of reality.”

“Certainly the correct technical answer. But you misunderstand me. The question was not *how* time chips away at our memories, but *why* we can even choose to forget our past. Look at you, Miss Kokutō. You know what you must say, but you do not relish the words.” Mr. Kurogiri shifts comfortably in his seat, the rays of gray sunlight behind him shifting with a wild accordance to his movement.

Reflexively, I am forced to take another empty swallow of air. “We... choose to forget to protect ourselves. Is that the right of it, sir?” At this point, all the force in my voice has been lost. He’s right. Yes, of course I know. He reads me so easily, and even just being here in front of him feels as if I’ve encountered someone ten times my intellectual superior. I’m a child again. I know, more so than most, that sometimes, remembering is more dangerous than forgetting. The sins of the past are faintly recalled, so all of us can claim the illusion of purity, so that we can judge ourselves better than the next person.

“Quite correct. You all choose to *forget* the crimes, the taboo, and your contrition, resigning them as a deeper part of yourselves that you can lock away and never look upon again. They’re dirty and stained records, and to look for them only brings pain. It is the same reason I am torn between finding the truth of my past, and choosing to discard it. But it is that emotion that I am cursed to feed upon, and so I return the records of those lost memories to their owners. Everyone chooses to forget some past stain. It’s not a sin. It is the only way we know how to live. It’s also part of what makes us better than monsters. We are aware of our sins. But I find I cannot separate myself from my past, but I know that if I return to it, I will return to a world of uncertainty and constant conflict. Such a world is undesirable, lacking the eternity I need. I grant the wishes of

people to stave back that force of conflict, leaving them to exercise their freedom in the memories that they've carelessly forgotten. If they commit evil because of it, then the blame can be laid at their feet, not mine.”

His words ring strangely. He says he searches for a past he desires in the dormant memories of people, and through it he, inadvertently or not, makes the person himself remember. He claims human agency as the reason he does not sin when he does this, but all that only has the hollow tone of a child’s excuse.

“And you still think that there is no evil in what you do, even if it clearly results in more conflict and death. Don’t you think you’re deluding yourself too much in your pursuit?”

“Yes. I truly believe in that fact. I do not desire anything, save for a means to see a definitive conclusion to my predicament.” While his declaration does not strike me as confident, he grants it an air of unnerving naturality, as though it was such an obvious fact that he is stymied by my ignorance.

But he has some measure of that ignorance as well. He thinks all memories are forgotten because of some old sin, when that is far from the truth. Some memories are forgotten only because they are not needed. Childish illusions and images of things, like clouds as animals, or the horizon as a reachable destination, are discarded as one grows older to make way for the truth. These memories serve no more use in a world of adult perspectives, except as humor based on a time of mere ignorance and shame.

“I pity you, then,” I say, surprising even myself with what comes out of my mouth. “It is only right to claim back your own past before toying with the memories of others.”

Again, no reaction from him. “But how so, when it was the fae themselves that robbed me of my memories? My memories about my time with them must be confused, complicated, and I cannot truly hope to understand them.”

“Wouldn’t understand...?” I parrot back at him stupidly, frowning. What does he mean by that? Since we have talked he has tended to refer to his circumstances as distant, like it was another person’s troubles and not his own. I don’t know from where that mannerism stems from, but...

“The fairies destroyed your memories?”

He nods. “Yes. To a limited extent. I didn’t lose myself. But they tied me always to the oblivion of strangers, ensuring that even when I escaped them, I’d never be able to go back home again.”

And now, for the first time, comes a change in the face he wears. It is not a truly big change, but for him, any change must be marked, as though his face exhibited this sort of transformation in the passing of strange ae ons. The smile he wears is now warped, a parody of its previous self, reflecting some dark image in his mind that he would rather forget, but still finds some sick pleasure in returning to. He continues, the tone of his voice changing slightly, though I can’t seem to detect what quality has entered them.

“The fae took me as a child, yes. For what purpose, I can’t say. Maybe they wanted to toy with me. Maybe they wanted a friend. I didn’t understand them. All they said was they wanted ‘eternity.’ I only wanted to go home. I knew the stories about children abducted by fairies. Replaced by changelings, never to go home again. I tried as hard as I could to cast aside their words and run. I ran and ran, stumbling on the overlarge roots of the trees, until finally, I slipped out of the forest sighting the open field that led to my home. Only when I saw the house did I dare to look back inside. And all I could see were countless corpses of little fae things, covered all in bright blood. And when I looked on my hands, I saw it was covered the same. And I knew then that the legends were true. That you could never go back. They made me theirs forever. You can imagine what happened at home after that.”

The cruel smile never leaves his face. So he was gone—for three days, according to Mikiya’s report—and comes back home covered in eerie blood. The reaction he’d receive is clear enough. And that event would inform everything that comes afterward. All its warm familiarity replaced by a cold fear.

“So the fairies didn’t kidnap you—”

“No. It seems I killed all of them in some mad dream. And in return, I was cursed with something I will never see the end of. My memories are never truly lost. But I fear that when I have them, they will be alien and unrecognizable as my own. And now, after that unfortunate event, I can no longer recall anything I experience. Everything after that is no longer memory, but mere information, and the world no longer images, but data. The world stopped when I was ten, and

though the how and why of it eludes me, it is a curse no should ever be forced to endure.”

He struggles to hold back a chuckle from escaping his careful lips. Satsuki Kurogiri’s mind was altered by the fairies, making it so that he never grew up from being ten years old. He says such strange things. Does he mean something metaphorical or literal when he said that he couldn’t recall anything he experiences? But that can’t be right. People can’t live like that. No new history being created, learning nothing new. A blank book where yesterday is written. If he is not lying, then everything repeated back to him always seems to be fresh and new.

“But that can’t possibly be true, sir. I mean, after all, you know my name don’t you? You know I’m Azaka Kokutō. If you cannot retrieve your memories, then surely this wouldn’t be known to you.”

He takes the repudiation in stride. “Is that so? You are nothing but mere words to me, Miss Kokutō. You are recorded that way. When I look at you, I see someone who closely corresponds to the recorded words, and so I name you Azaka Kokutō. If someone were to come along that fit your description as well, then she would also be Azaka Kokutō. There is nothing wrong with this. I do not recognize you for who you are, but only a collection of information: height, weight, structure, skin color, hair, speech, age, and such. You are only Azaka Kokutō to me because you are the closest to fulfilling the criteria I have set for you. Encoding, storage, and recognition all work. Only the retrieval portion of the process is damaged. Of course, this method will have its inevitable mismatches. A major change in your appearance is enough to ensure that I recognize you as someone different. The school has called me easy to forget because of this, and I am only happy to let them think this.”

Now the smile disappears from his face entirely, replaced by a blank, straight faced expression. Somehow, it calms me. In his explanation, I think I can see the reason why I’d thought he bore an uncanny resemblance to Mikiya. Both of them put in nothing of themselves when judging another person, willing to listen to anyone and give them a chance. It is only that one single peculiarity that binds them, but also the same property that separates them clearly. Satsuki Kurogiri only does it to find himself in the memories and desires of others, and he is

driven to hear and grant them. He is childish in his beliefs, and his inability to recognize his mocking smile is a greater proof of that. He has no thoughts, no original ideas, unable to understand complex concepts. That is why he can only know people by collecting their lost memories. Like a machine, he reflects it back at those who speak to him, and in a world where an independent will is necessary for function, he is uniquely crippled.

“I pity you,” I repeat. “You’re never certain about your reality.”

There is a pause, and then a silent, patient nod, and then, “But that is enough for me. I do not feel that I smile. I see my five fingers, I know I move them, but I cannot feel my arm as my own. My body too is just information in the end. But we are creatures of the mind, aren’t we? Our mind is all we need. The world we see is only stimulus in our brains. Reality is always vague, and we can never be certain if it is all a lie. All of it is subjective. Our Art that changes reality itself should be proof enough of that. All that we can be certain of is what is inside our very heads, the mind and its soul that are outside of this material prison. But even the true reality of our minds is corrupted by the curse of this fallen world. It is why the gathering of memories so interests me. Through it, I can perhaps study the human consensus that gives this world its power. But I always remember: *dubito ergo cogito ergo sum*. We have no need for stable bodies and objective realities. The soul itself does not dwell here, and nor does eternity, and there is little meaning left in this fallen world, this simulacrum.”

His face remains level, even uninterested at what he himself is saying. He doesn’t really seem to be appealing to me emotionally, though at first I tried to understand his plight. But his words tell me there is no person in there, no man shaping them. Only some empty book moulded by the memories he stole and the ambition of regaining his own through the Art. But in the end, those memories betrayed even him. And when he switched to looking into the minds of other people, he saw their “corruption.” His mind, not having left that forest since he was ten, turned to fear. He cannot permit the corruption he sees, nor the corruption of the “fallen world.” His fear won’t permit him to. He is literally cursed not to think of anything else.

“That’s why you searched for your memories even after you knew it was impossible,” I observe. “The fairies bound you to.”

The man of the demiurge nods.

“A mage once shared to me his plan of ascension by recording the deaths of all humanity. But I desire a world of eternity, because I love humanity too much. But it is too much for me. I do not know what to think anymore. There is too much noise. Everyone must be at peace, but they do so much to throw it away. I cannot guide them to that quiescence. I only try to find all the answers in memory, in the hopes that the shared history of humanity can give me something. It is quite possible it will be fruitless. But since the future holds nothing for me, there is no other way.”

It saddens me to look at him now, a creature that cannot even begin to realize that people forget the common answers so quickly. He believes—or is cursed to believe—that’s what makes us imperfect creatures. And within the contradictions of the people whose memories he has robbed, and within the contradictions of his own shattered recollections, he has the singular hope of finding the answer to that problem.

“I have only two questions left to ask,” I declare. His unflinchingly smiling face seems to eat in the sentence.

“And what would those be?” he asks.

“You didn’t need to collect the lost memories, nor did you need to grant wishes. Why did you do so?”

He nods in unspoken comprehension. “Simple enough. It is what I need to feel, at the very least, human. Though the fae have their curse, the granting of wishes is an act I can own, an act beyond the fae magic. Do it enough times, I figure, and I can start to believe I’m doing out of my own will. And that’s what we all need to feel human. Without it, I would not have purpose. It is the natural inclination of a mage, isn’t it, Azaka Kokutō? These were the words you wanted to hear.”

I sigh deeply, as the man who would grant people’s wishes and dreams nods contentedly to himself. Before I move to leave the room, I inquire one last thing, not as the girl assigned to investigate this whole incident, but as Azaka Kokutō, the person.

“One last thing before I leave. What is Misaya Ōji to you?” My interest and

concern in this person has long left, but the answer to this question will tell me everything I need to know about him. And perhaps I can find the last bit of a person inside him. But the answer is just as I had thought. “Miss Ōji is what she is. Does that concern you?”

“Misaya Ōji loves you, you know.”

“A fleeting illusion, I am sure.”

“So you harbor no love for her?”

“That is for her to decide.”

Simple answers that nevertheless ring hollow. No humanity is in that voice, but only a calm acceptance.

“And that is the will you value so dearly?”

“Yes, I suppose. In the end, she was not so different from the other students, really. Nor was she exempt from my acts. No one was. But it was Misaya Ōji that immediately suited my needs.”

He says all this with the collectedness of someone relaying simple data, but I am more concerned about his curious statement than he is. I take one step forward at him.

“No. Don’t tell me—”

“Yes. Class D was not the only group I affected. All the people on this campus bears my touch in some way. After all, it is not only class D that contained a stain on their conscience that needed to come to light. You all just haven’t noticed it yet.”

But that’s absurd. If he’s echoed the sins of close to eight hundred people, then he’s also reflected the wishes of just as many. Within that number, there must be at least someone who hates Satsuki Kurogiri enough to wish for his death. She might be on the move even now—

“Let me stop you right there, Miss Kokutō. There is no need to worry. If someone were to move to intend me harm, then let it be so. Whatever her wish, or whatever its outcome, the sin falls to her alone. Again, it is not for me to judge.”

He talks as if to ignore his own death. It is not the words of someone prepared to die, but someone who devalues his own existence.

“I...am mistaken, then,” I say nervously. Before, I thought this man could do no real harm. But now I find that is untrue. The damage he does is far deeper and more sinister than I’d ever tried to imagine. “You were never like Mikiya.”

Satsuki Kurogiri nods in seeming satisfaction. I turn my back on him, moving toward the door. This place has already tired me, and my business with him is done.

“That was a long interrogation,” he calls behind me. “Longer than any conversation I’ve had, maybe.”

“Not by my own choice, you’ll find. My mentor sent me here to run an investigation into all this. And because Miss Ōji can’t be here to ask the same questions, as I am sure she would.” I continue walking toward the door. I take one last look at Satsuki Kurogiri, and the expression plastered on his face is an odd smile, seeming almost fake and stiff.

“Miss Ōji is in the old school building. He failed to enlist both you and Miss Ryōgi to her cause, so she has been forced to hurry her plans. She has gathered the students of class D in the building and plans to burn all of them. Yes...you should hurry, if you want to stop her.”

My eyes widen, and my feet instantly slam into action, breaking into a run out of the room and the building. That final statement was, I feel, made out of his own volition, and not through any fae curse, but I only notice this when I am already well out of the main building.

## **Records in Oblivion - VIII**

The rain begins to fall, first in a drizzle, and then in a more steady, rhythmic pace that falls upon the stone and concrete, the wood and mud. Nothing can be seen beyond the tree line of the forest that forms a perimeter around this old ruin, but I stand here, little else save the trees in my field of vision. The rain begins to get heavier, and starts to ruin my view of the building, half a charred derelict that looks fresh and almost recently burned, and the other half miraculously saved from further immolation.

The girls are all gathered in the fourth floor, asleep. But it will not be by my hand that the hammer finally falls. I wait only for one of them to start the cleansing fire herself. And I await only the cleansing rain to wash over me completely. Standing at the mouth of an open wall on the second floor, I see Azaka Kokutō emerge from the forest, her steps splashing water around her.

I sigh, disappointed, and set out to the stairwell to meet her.

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The rain drops cling to the black uniform robes, and the winter weather makes them almost as cold as snow. Her breath is white upon the air, and her shivers are barely suppressed. Azaka Kokutō tries to ignore all of this, which she finds harder and harder to do now that she has finally arrived at the old junior high school building. As with yesterday, she enters through what used to be the building's front entrance. The building still carries its burnt half like a festering

wound, still hurting, but the rest of it only gives the impression that it has been abandoned a decade more than it really has. The vibrant voices of the students, once this structure's very breath, are now only half-imagined echoes reverberating in the charred halls and destroyed doors.

Now there is only the barely perceptible keening of something located a bit farther from the entrance, and an offensive smell in the air. The moment Azaka smells it, she recognizes it for what it is. Gasoline. That, along with gunpowder, has proven to be the materials she has found a constant use for in her practice of the Art, and she finds she has a nose for it.

“What a bother,” she sighs, both shoulders drooping as she does. “I’m going all this way for a woman I’ve only ever met once.”

As she walks, she retrieves a glove from her pocket and slips it on her right hand. The glove is a dull brown, made from leather, given to her by her mentor Tōko. Made from salamander skin, she uses it to channel her Art, giving her an ease of control she otherwise wouldn’t have had without it. When she finishes putting it on and flexes the fingers of her right hand, she reaches the stairwell leading to the second floor. She stops immediately upon looking up, for there, waiting in the landing, is Misaya Ōji.

“Is obstinacy your defining quality, Miss Kokutō?” she asks, her tone of voice the gentle suggestion of the helpful classmate teaching a favorite friend. Her posture in the darkened landing, however, speaks otherwise. Her stance is wide and steady, prepared and looking down on Azaka. The air around her buzzes, filled with the keening sound Azaka had heard earlier, and though she doesn’t truly see them, she knows it is the fairy familiars that surround her, awaiting the signal from their queen to begin the attack.

The aura of imminent danger that Misaya Ōji clothes herself with has not changed since their first encounter in this same building. Azaka recognizes the position of disadvantage she would start with if combat were to begin now. Misaya Ōji has the high ground, and the distance between them too wide to close for the kind of combat that Azaka would prefer to occur. As usual, however, she puts this in the back of her mind and tries to talk to the girl looming above her.

“It’s a trait that’s served me pretty well. So I take it your plan here involved

some mental suggestion, forcing the students of class D to commit suicide.”

“Naturally. I have shepherded them here, but the task of the fire they must perform themselves. Only then will they pay contrition for their sin. I have had to accelerate my plans because of you and that other girl. Only a few in the class are actually on the verge of suicide because of the predations of memory and sorrow that have plagued the school, but you need only one to push everyone else over the edge.”

“Hmph. No one I talked with seemed too far gone to be marked as suicidal, though, but that’s just my opinion. Still, you’ve prepared quite the stage here. Conditions are perfect, and the atmosphere is fairly correct for dying. A regular shepherd of unwilling souls, aren’t we, Miss Ōji?”

I shrug, but Misaya Ōji seems to misunderstand the gesture and frowns. “But you came here for a reason other than the students, Miss Kokutō?” “Oh, of course. After all, an unbeliever like me has no use for stupid evaluations of crime and punishment like you have been doing. If it is true that some of those girls desire to kill themselves, as you claim, then who am I to stop them, right?” Azaka smiles, and Misaya Ōji can’t tell for certain whether it speaks of a simple ignorance, feigned or real, at the blasphemy she just uttered.

Misaya Ōji narrows her eyes dourly. “Then what could you have possibly come here for? Revenge against me, is it?”

“Fairly close, but still not dead center. I came here out of pity for you, Misaya Ōji.” As she says that, Azaka inspects the staircase that separates her and her target. Because the building was made for junior high school students, the steps are not that tall nor numerous. She figures that she can clear the entire thing in two well-timed leaps if she needed to.

“Pity? For me?” Animosity starts to boil in Misaya Ōji’s dark almond eyes. Azaka shifts slightly at that, careful not to provoke her enough to dispatch her familiars just yet.

“Miss Ōji, why did you even talk with Mr. Kurogiri?”

“Because he is my brother,” she swiftly replies.

“Right, right. And who did you receive your power from?”

“That too was my brother’s gift.”

“I see. When was it, then, that you recognized Mr. Kurogiri as your brother?”

“From the very beginning.”

But no sooner have the words left Misaya Ōji’s mouth when she realizes the contradiction, and her eyebrows twitch at the small revelation. Her mouth opens slightly, hanging dumbly and letting go of a cracked and hesitant breath when she realizes that she cannot reconcile the sequence of events in her mind. Azaka sees this, allowing the faintest hint of a smile to play across her face.

“Well, that’s how it is, Miss Ōji. You didn’t go to talk to Mr. Kurogiri because he was your brother. You went to him first and foremost because he was the homeroom instructor of class D. And it wasn’t strictly to consult on the matter of Kaori Tachibana either. You’re the most powerful student on campus. You could have reached Hideo Hayama and talked to him directly even without Mr. Kurogiri’s help. And afterwards, Hideo Hayama just turns up gone, likely dead. In your wisdom, you probably tried to pass it off as an unfortunate accident, like most confused killers do. But it doesn’t change the fact that you killed him. And because it troubled you like nothing else before, you went to talk to Mr. Kurogiri. And he was only too happy to help, wasn’t he, Miss Ōji?”

Misaya Ōji keeps her silence, her eyes fixed on the empty air before her as if some horrific and unseen shadow only she beheld stands before her, forgetting the troublesome student standing at the foot of the stairs and retreating into her thoughts. She goes back to the thoughts of her supposed brother, and she wonders when it was that she started to dress the role for that persuasive man. It could not have been when they first met. And besides, how could she remember? She does not even know her brother’s face. Only one possibility is left. She had used the fairies to plunder him of a memory. And something in that mind touched by fae changed her and what she saw in the man. It awoke latent memories, assigned him a role to play in her life.

“I—I was...” Misaya Ōji cannot finish.

“You never knew. It was never by your own memories that you saw Mr. Kurogiri as a brother. It was through his own memories that you came to that realization. A stranger’s memories, where no truth of your own can be drawn. He

made you see what you wanted to see, and it was no favor. To him, you were the same as the fairies that surround you. As you exploit them, so does he exploit you.”

Azaka remembers what Shiki said to her yesterday as she found her asleep in this building. Even then, she had already observed that Misaya Ōji had been one of those afflicted with forgetfulness. Maybe she had grasped upon the solution early and unwittingly.

“This...isn’t—” Ōji stammers, breathing hard as if she was drowning, a glistening of sweat visible on her long neck. But with a single gulp of air, she manages to find herself and her voice. “That is a lie!”

At that moment, Azaka weaves her Art as with their first encounter, picking out the countless pockets of heat in the air. A flash of a moment afterward, the heat of the fairies rush forward blindly, like they were responding to Misaya Ōji’s outburst of rage. They consolidate themselves into a thin line and speed like bullets toward Azaka. To her senses, the storm of heat is as fine and dangerous as a naked blade, slicing downward through the stairwell and toward Azaka below. But Azaka’s spell allows her to feel exactly when they move, giving her just enough time to put her back flat against the wall. She can *feel* the dangerous warmth of their flight on the skin of her face, rushing past her with great momentum.

She wastes no time. As soon as the flight of fairies have gone past, she puts strength into her feet and leaps up the steps of the staircase. She only has a few seconds. Having deftly avoided the fairies that Misaya Ōji had tried to use as a makeshift weapon, Azaka has the benefit of seeing Ōji’s face of utter astonishment. She is up in three big steps, just slightly in excess of what she’d predicted. She doesn’t stop, maintaining her momentum and checking Misaya Ōji with a body blow to the abdomen so she can sweep past her to the center of the landing.

She hears Ōji grunt when she is hit, but already she works the fairies to redouble the attack. Azaka stops as soon as she is past Ōji, caught between the tall girl and the fairies behind her that have not yet entered the battle. Azaka senses the pockets of heat that she had dodged swinging back around toward her, and the fairies only a few feet beside her start to beat their wings and move.

Exactly as she wants. Though the fairies are like bullets, she will not be a foolish deer caught so easily.

Azaka takes a wide stance, then throws out her hands on either side of her, toward the direction of both swarms of fairies, careful to avoid pointing a hand to Misaya Ōji. “AZOLT!” Azaka calls out. The lorica echoes, and she feels her weaving of the Art course through her, a magical ritual boiled down to a single moment. The tingle of the temperature rising seeps through the skin of both mages.

The next thing they see is the eruption of a conflagration as startling as it is sudden, burning numerous invisible things in the air in a spontaneous combustion on either side of Azaka. Countless shrieks of anguish, high and tremulous, are heard until they all fall down silent on the floor. A few seconds later, when Azaka is satisfied, she clenches her gloved fist, and the fire extinguishes itself, the only proof of its passing being the smoke rising from embers on the ground. Settling her hands back to her sides, the firestarter sighs.

“This is the true face of the magic which you think you’ve learned,” Azaka says. “But the Art is not learned. It carves your soul with truth forever, and I do not see that mark in you. The Art doesn’t open to you in a month or two, as you thought it did with you. But the contract you forged with Mr. Kurogiri offers you a suitable substitute, doesn’t it?”

Lingering smoke still emanates from Azaka’s right hand, but soon that too vanishes. Misaya Ōji looks upon her with an expression somewhere in between amazement and confusion. Her legs finally give way, and both her knees fall to the ground.

“So...so this is it...” she says blankly. Somehow, she finds in herself the will to make a silent smile, wishing she had realized everything so much sooner.

*I talked to Hideo Hayama about Kaori Tachibana’s death, but it quickly turned into an argument. I kept saying he was responsible. I blamed him for everything. And he kept denying it. But I was right. I’m always right. I was getting irrational, thinking that any measure might be acceptable. I recall pushing him, but after that, everything is a haze, but it fades to me, facing his*

*still-warm corpse. And for the first time in my life, I didn't know what to do. I sought the help of Satsuki Kurogiri. After all, talking to my father or the university president would be suicide. But he...he had a presence to him, like he could solve everything and grant my every wish. To a person like me who valued only merit, this man of little attachment to anything was a mystery to be solved. He could save me. And as I had desired, he gave me all I needed to settle everything.*

*Satsuki took the role of the beloved brother I'd lost so long ago. Satsuki made real the power I needed to pay back Kaori's death. He always said that clean hands need not touch that which was tainted. Why did I never notice that it was not myself and the other students that he spoke of? He said that in order to not be dirtied, one must use someone else to do it for you. He understood then, as I understood, that all the students of class D had to die to pay.*

*If only I had realized earlier that all will be the same in the end.*

“If I had said nothing, all would have gone better,” Misaya Ōji whispers. She is looking at the wall, but it seems altogether like she is looking at some vast emptiness beyond it, paying no attention to me standing beside her. However, I’m sure the words are for me to hear.

“I knew, but something kept me from remembering. I loved him, and it made me not want to destroy the fantasy he crafted just for me. I didn’t want him to love anyone else, and in turn I loved only him. But it would always be a secret. Even if he thought nothing of me.”

The story she recounts is an old one, for her and me both. And I have to acknowledge its familiarity, sickening though it is. I could have said the same words myself.

“I can’t live without at least acknowledging that,” Misaya Ōji says, muttering it mournfully as if saying it out loud were the gravest sin she could have done.

“Miss Ōji, you should know that it was Mr. Kurogiri that drove Kaori Tachibana to suicide. He never loved you. Only made you believe you did. The revenge you sought so much is meaningless to him,” I say without bothering to think through.

“Don’t be foolish, Miss Kokutō. I told you, did I not? All of that was known to me. All I need do was remember.”

Hands and knees on the floor, she bends down and hides her face in a position of prostration. I hear her making a noise, which I mistake at first for laughter. Only when I look closer do I see the wet tears falling to the floor from hidden eyes.

I leave her there, in the building where children once roamed, now only as pathetic and lonely as she is. The rain that fell upon the forest earlier in the hour has gone into a thick fog, obscuring the trees and hiding the path back home in a dreamlike haze.

## **Records in Oblivion - IX**

I dreamed of a memory when, as a child, I still lived in the family house. I dreamed of the distant past.

We had a neighbor then. An old man, whose family had all left him, alone in a little house all by himself. Dementia had long crept up on him, and even remembering the events of yesterday was a rare feat for him. Yet he was kindly, and warm towards us always.

I always maintained a distance from him, but my brother Mikiya became very close to him. Perhaps the old man saw my brother as a way to forget the loneliness, if only for a while, by talking to a boy next door. They spent time talking about trivial things, but my brother would come home every time to tell me all about what he had said as if they were the most important things to him.

But the day came. It was suppertime, and no one ever truly saw it coming. It was my brother that went over to the old man's house that discovered him collapsed on the floor, unwaking, and told our parents. It was our parents that rushed to him, doing what they could, and it was them who shook their heads when we asked the questions that must be asked. We knew what it meant. The mood of the suppertime table strained and vanished quickly. And inexplicably, I found myself crying for him. He had endured ten long years without his family, only to pass away unthanked. Even I, who I had thought had already hardened her heart, had to shed tears for this man.

And if even I was brought to tears, I thought how hard it must be for my brother. But he didn't cry. His face betrayed only the faintest glimmers of

sorrow, but he didn't cry. I thought at first that he was feigning a strength that he didn't truly have, even though it would be foolish of him to think that a display of such strength would win him any favors.

Days passed, and not a single tear passed from Mikiya's eyes. I found him sitting by the veranda at night, looking up at a bright full moon. I took a place beside him, and like him, looked up to see the countless stars. And I asked him.

“Why aren't you crying?”

“Who knows,” he said. He looked down at me from his height with an awkward look. His eyes were pained but steady.

“Is it because boys don't cry?” I asked, repeating the words my father once said. But my brother only shook his head. “Why aren't you crying?” I repeated.

“I want to, but I shouldn't. Because crying should be special.” Thinking the matter settled, he looked back up at the night sky. Even as I recall it now, his face then was the closest he came to crying, but in the end, he never did. He, more so than anyone, was close to that old man, and he, more so than anyone, deserved to cry.

Because crying should be special. It casts a shadow over everyone who sees, letting feelings of sadness slip in easily to all who witness it. It is a contagion, an echo that worsens the grief. But it is still special, and private.

That is why he doesn't cry. More than anyone I know, he would never willingly hurt another, and he holds all the anger and grief he can carry inside him for the benefit of others. If he were to cry, it would be for someone truly special, someone truly personal. But for that understanding of others, he trades himself ever being understood by anyone. Nobody understands him for what he is. He must have been so lonely then.

And it was at that singular point that Mikiya Kokutō became someone truly special to me. An important figure that I would struggle never to lose. It was a night when the moonlight played wildly off the glass, and whenever the lights of the city could not hope to match it. And so, brother and sister turned skyward to see that blanket of stars. And that is the image I see every time. It is an old dream from a day that should be left long forgotten.

January 11, Monday.

Classes have begun again, and I've returned to the mundane student life. With my classes done for the day, I hurry back to the dormitory to prepare. Afterwards, I go the main office building to secure permission to exit the premises for the day. The sisters greet me with stern faces of disapproval, but they know I've never done anything to their disliking outside Reien, and so, as always, permission is granted.

When I exit the main office, I manage to run into Fujino, spotting her by her distinctly fine raven hair first and foremost.

“Going out again, Azaka?” she asks gently.

“For a while. I might not make it for curfew this time, though, so can you tell Seo for me?”

She nods, promising to tell the message to my roommate. Satisfied, we say goodbye to each other. Hurrying through the forest path with a quick step, I eventually reach Reien's front entrance. The guard leaves the larger gate for cars to pass through unopened, instead opening the smaller side gate for me to use.

As soon as I step outside the campus grounds, I see someone waiting for me who I know all too well. His wardrobe choice never changes: an all-black ensemble that makes him look like he just came from a funeral, though I'm glad to see that at least the coat he's wearing is a light shade of brown. I allow myself a moment to calm my breathing and my voice before walking up to him.

“Did I keep you waiting, Mikiya?”

He leans his head forward a bit, looking at me over the top of his glasses, then points a finger at his reddened nose. “What do you think?” He smiles, and I can't rightly tell whether it's genuine or sarcastic. “So, we going? It's only two hours before your curfew, so we'd best hurry.”

He begins to walk, and I situate myself astride him, trying to lower my heart rate by a few beats. We walk parallel to Reien's tall fortifications as we head to the nearby bus station.

This whole event started when yesterday, out of the blue, Mikiya called me up. Apparently worried about leaving me high and dry during New Year's for Shiki, he arranged this to make up for the entire incident. A little late to give you New Year's money, I think. But hey, you're a loaded girl anyway, right? he had said. It was just too funny to keep being angry at him, so for now, he's forgiven. I told him that I didn't need the money, and that maybe we should just go shopping instead. When he asked me what we would shop for, I couldn't give him an answer. So I decided to sleep on it, and now here I am, walking beside him, still lacking an answer.

"So, where are we heading today?" Mikiya asks. I cock my head to one side and stare at him in puzzlement. "For dinner, I mean. You want Japanese or a Western restaurant? I'll treat you." Again, I cock my head like a songbird.

Does he...does he mean he's taking me out on a date?

"You couldn't decide on anything yesterday, right? So I thought maybe taking you out to dinner would be okay." I look up at him in astonishment. Did he say anything about this over the phone yesterday? I don't think he did! "What, can't even decide on a place to go? Fine, let me choose one for you. Don't worry, it'll be a place appropriate for the fine, upstanding young lady, and even the price isn't gonna scare me off." He beams at me.

Does he really think that women are so easily swayed by meal offers? "*I shouldn't be asking. I guess he does,*" I whisper under my breath.

"What's that?" asks Mikiya, but I choose to ignore him with a sigh. After all, even if I complained, he'd still probably take me there. I fell in love with him the same way, after all. I felt like it was the right thing—even the most natural thing—to fall in love with him, abandoning what I'd tried so hard to avoid. Not too hasty, I repeat to myself like a mantra, in as low a voice as I can.

"You sure do like to whisper conspiratorially, Azaka. There anything wrong?" asks Mikiya. I shake my head in a negative. And for a moment, all the world feels lighter, and all the questions in my head seem lessened.

"It's nothing, really. Just swearing to myself not to screw up like some other girl I know in Reien." I take his arm, wrap it around mine, and that is the farthest I can go before anyone starts to ask questions that lead to awkward explanations.

With a slightly reddened face, Mikiya walks with a steady pace. I follow his lead, travelling to the sparkling, shining city where night is only beginning to fall.

And so, my New Year's outing finally starts, even though it is a bit late. And yes, I eventually do decide on some nice, extravagant Japanese food.

## **Records in Oblivion - X**

After finishing his classes for the day, Satsuki Kurogiri heads back to his room. The weather had maintained a fine cloudy firmament since morning, and it cast the corridors of the school in the filter of a monochrome portrait, and about as still and silent as one as well.

He opens the door to his room, taking in the sights of it well. It is filled with little knick-knacks and assorted objects, books and tomes. But they carry the air of having not been played with, or having not been used with the intent of study at all. The books all look like they were as new as the day they were bought, and maybe they have never been opened. Gray sunlight streams in from the window, lending a façade of frozen time to the entire place. As soon as Satsuki Kurogiri can confirm that all is in place just as he had recorded in memory, he steps inside.

With a sharp thud, he closes the door behind him.

At the same time, he feels a sharp, piercing pain.

He lowers his glance, seeing only a Reien student standing only a head below him. Somehow, he feels like he should know her. She holds in her hands a knife, which she has buried deep into his stomach, the blade barely seen.

“Who are you,” he asks weakly, though not in anger. The girl student refuses to answer. Her hand trembles on the blade’s grip, and Satsuki Kurogiri feels every vibration inside of him. The student cannot even look up at the one she had attacked. He observes her.

Height, weight, hair, skin color, structure. As far as he has recorded, only one

student fits the bill closest.

"It's you, isn't it?" asks Satsuki. "You waited here to murder me." She still refuses to answer. Satsuki offers her a shrug, and a gentle hand on her shoulder in order that her tension would drop. "Then go. Your part in this act is done."

The words, spoken without malice or hatred, even in the end, only succeed in making her trembling worse. The disquiet in the girl is evident, more at unease, it would seem, from the truth of his statement than from act of assault she had just committed. A few more precious seconds pass until the girl finally releases the knife, as though relinquishing it to the man she had stabbed. She hurries away, out of the room.

Catching his last glimpse of her, he still cannot be sure who he is seeing is as he assumed. Who was she? All the characteristics he had recorded were correct except for her hair. It is shorter, he thinks, cut wildly and with little care. Still, something as broad a change as that means that for Satsuki Kurogiri, the girl is as good as a stranger met for the first time.

Struggling, he closes his door, securing the lock with a satisfying click. Every step he takes scatters a few droplets of blood to the floor, dripping lazily from the wound where a knife still clings to. That last act finally saps his last remaining strength, and he is forced to lean on the nearby wall, his body sliding down slowly against it until he is sitting upon the floor. He thinks that death will be of little concern, since he has long ago known it would end with something like this.

He looks down on his weakened body. Ironic. He finds that it too is different from the Satsuki Kurogiri recorded in his mind. Maybe that is why death does not engender in him the kind of fear that grips most people. He collects himself, even as the bleeding continues to worsen by the second. He knows there will be no relief here, and that death will come in mere minutes, perhaps ten. He sighs, deciding to use these minutes the best way he knows how. But ten minutes is too short. What should he think, or feel, or imagine? But time is a lesser problem. He is born now, and will die only ten minutes later. A lifetime of minutes, perhaps more worthy than other years walked on the good earth.

*Think, he tells himself. Imagine.* He consumes the larger portion of his final

minutes considering in this way, barely feeling the pain in his stomach. And in this mysterious last lifetime of clarity, he is surprised he can find an answer to his deliberation.

His breathing is rough.

The minutes are long.

The bleeding is dire.

The life is short.

He clears his mind from all other extant thoughts, and focuses on that one answer so that he can tell it to himself.

“Maybe I will think of what I thought before I was born.” It is the last oblivion he can draw from, the time of memory that no human has. The world before one was born, with no symbolic value, and no conflict. His distress is a very simple thing. “If I had not been born, the world, and myself, would maybe be a lot more peaceful.”

Happy and content, Satsuki Kurogiri smiles. He fails to understand the meaning of the gesture. But he understands the value of it now; realizing, for the first time in his life, that he is actually smiling.

The mage was right. You can't die just with a word. But people do die someday. Entropy demands that we die, disappear, and be forgotten. Otherwise, the boundary between past and future will be empty and meaningless. Reversing entropy takes a kind of energy we don't have, and so things gain value in their temporality.

But things can still lie eternal. Even if something is gone and forgotten, the fact of its existence didn't change. It dwells in the mind, always with you, residing in its dark corners, awaiting only the right trigger to return. Which is why the more I think about it, the mage trying to derive eternity from the oblivion of memories seems to my perspective, like wasted effort. Things left forgotten are never truly gone, and somewhere in you is the truth...or what passes for the truth. That was already the kind of eternity he was looking for, wasn't it?

Now I know why **Shiki** made me forget the important memories from three and four years ago. He knew they were just there inside of me, perfectly asleep. And even if I can't remember them, they are still there. That mage knew that, but still couldn't accept it, still couldn't see how that forgotten state could somehow be a good thing. The only thing he wanted was to pursue his misguided philosophy. In the end, the eternity that was as strong as his words came to be a reckless and worthless goal.

The morning of January 7 eventually comes, and I am glad that this marks the official day where I take off the ridiculously restrictive uniforms of Reien. Sadly,

Azaka gets to stay in school for now while I go outside, living the life of a free woman once again. I crumple the fake transfer request form up and throw it in the waste bin like some kind of old cleansing ritual. Azaka's word to the Mother Superior should take care of everything else.

Happily wearing my leather jacket again on top of the blue kimono Akitaka sent for me, I head to the front gate, ready to leave behind this strange world of forest and stone. But as soon as I step outside the front gates, I see someone waiting for me who I know all too well.

"So you've got nothing better to do than to wait for me to get out of here?" I ask.

"A vacation day from Miss Tōko and her generosity. It's not gonna be like this all the time, you know." He shrugs. He does it exactly the same way. A shrug that makes it look like what just happened was your fault. I remember it with even more conviction now too, as I do the biting cold. And it only reminds me that I hadn't wanted to see Mikiya today.

I carry old memories now. Awkward ones. Maybe dangerous ones. And being next to Mikiya while I haven't had time to have even thought properly on it only makes me more at unease. But maybe seeing his face might be better than still being afraid of the entire thing. Maybe.

"Then how's about we start our day with a good old waste of time?" I suggest sarcastically. "I've got an amazingly worthless fairy tale to spin for you, and I'll let you hear it." I start to walk down the road parallel Reien's walls, and Mikiya easily keeps up, like we have been doing for the longest time.

"Well, you're in a good mood today," he says as he looks at me straight in the face. But my eyes dart downwards almost instinctively, and I try my best not to let him notice it. I don't know if it worked.

In the time it takes for us to ride back to the downtown area, I finish telling Mikiya the whole deal about Satsuki Kurogiri and Misaya Ōji. We walk for a while amongst the familiar streets and buildings, not going back to our apartments, but instead somehow settling on an unspoken agreement to head to Tōko's office.

“So mostly everyone in the school had some kind of memory drawn out from them by Satsuki Kurogiri, right?” Mikiya muses with an expression of comprehension on his face. “But it was Misaya Ōji that wanted class D to suffer the most, hence the letters. The other students had their secrets revealed to themselves, but not to the other people that would stand to be affected by them.”

“Yeah, yeah, that I know. The real question here is how come it was only Misaya Ōji’s stupid wish that resulted in the real chaos in the school?” “Right. She had to have been special in some way for Satsuki Kurogiri to go the extra mile for her. He only drew memories and revealed them to other students. But for Misaya Ōji, he actually gave her the means to act on her own.”

His observation is correct, now that I think about it. Satsuki Kurogiri was a mirror reflecting the desires of the students, but this wasn’t so true for Misaya Ōji. “But why?” I whisper. Mikiya either didn’t hear me, or chooses not to answer.

We walk in silence like that for a while, with me still refusing to meet his gaze directly. The stroll is made just a little bit uncomfortable by the cold air. It’s the kind of cold that really gets under your skin, no matter how much clothing you’re packing. After a few more wordless blocks have been passed, Mikiya turns to me, brow furrowed and with half of a frown formed in his mouth.

“Shiki, the truth is that Satsuki Kurogiri really did have a sister.” He says nothing more, and the reasons for him saying so he leaves only to speculation. Whether Ōji was really his sister or not, only Satsuki Kurogiri knows. And the irony is that, if what he told me about how his silly parody of a “memory” works, the man himself wouldn’t even know. Whatever the truth was, it’d be lost forever. Hah, again with this “forever” business.

“It’s definitely a weird story. I kind of feel bad for Satsuki Kurogiri, you know?” I think I have to qualify that there was no lie in me saying that. His situation with memory and feeling does, after all, resemble a certain girl’s situation only a few months ago. Mikiya, however, fails to recognize this, and only blinks his eyes in astonishment at what I just said.

“Huh. Even though he supposedly attacked you? Actual sympathy from Shiki Ryōgi. Color me surprised.”

“I’m not defending what he did specifically, you dunce. It’s just that I... understand why he was so desperate, I guess.” After all, how could I begrudge him and his actions? I can’t fool myself. Those long walks at night, travelling to dark alleys and narrow streets; I know what I was really after then, and it was something altogether worse than just messing with people’s memories.

“And besides,” I continue, “the guy’s kinda like you.”

“Can’t say I see how that could be.”

“Oh c’mon, if you read your name differently, it would be *Kurogiri* <sup>1</sup> too, wouldn’t it?”

Mikiya chuckles. “Glad to see that your wits are still intact after being in that place.”

“Just a dead language joke,” I say, as Mikiya looks at me sideways, perplexed at what I just said. When I catch a glimpse of his face, I can’t prevent myself from laughing a little.

“What’s wrong now?” he demands.

“Nothing, man. Was just entertaining the thought of me killing you, seeing as I didn’t get to kill anybody back there.” I laugh again, and Mikiya can only shake his head. I really can’t blame him. It is, after all, a very strange pair of sentences I just said. “Don’t mind me,” I quickly add. “Just thinking out loud, is all. And my thoughts tend to sound a bit less obvious to me when I actually say them.”

On account of thoughts put into words, when meaning is lost and it becomes a mere sound. When the mage Satsuki Kurogiri stayed a child, and grew as one, he too lost the meaning of being an adult, thinking that pure mimesis would be enough.

“If you say so,” Mikiya says with a shrug. “Besides, I’ve never hurt anyone, let alone killed someone, so don’t expect me to relate.”

Sometimes, this guy can be such an idiot. But at least he’s the bearable sort of idiot. Having laughed off the last traces of my anxiety over the returned memories, at least for the moment, I continue to walk beside him, letting a smile rest on my face as I do. Before the both of us can notice, night has fallen, and the moon, seemingly frozen in place, floats with the stars overhead. In another

unspoken agreement, we decide to forgo our visit to Tōko’s office, passing through it only on our way to continue our stroll, past unknown streets and winding alleys, through the dark circulatory system of the city. In the idleness of our walk and in the midst of our steady breaths, I find the willingness to finally meet his glance.

He might be an idiot, but I’m glad to be with him right now. The reason, such as it is, is simple when I think about it. This is, after all, the first time that I went out at night for a stroll with a companion.

<sup>1</sup> Mikiya’s surname of “Kokutō,” can be read alternatively as Kuro (黒) giri (桐), the same way Satsuki’s surname is read, but with different characters (玄霧, Kurogiri).

## **Boundary Goetia**

I need to beat someone up.

I don't care who it is, but I'd prefer it if it was somebody I wouldn't feel any guilt over, and preferably done in a place where nobody can see me. For a fella, I'm pretty shy, and I don't want this ending up with me expelled from school, at least not until I'm done.

After thinking on it for a week, I know exactly who to hit and where to do it. It's going to be a schoolmate of mine, a grade or two lower than me probably. The blond-dyed kid looked at me funny this one time when we passed the hallway. The place is going to be near an arcade he frequents. Thinks he's a big shot over there, winning in video games, and letting loose with his fists at anyone who dares make him lose.

He doesn't do it inside, though. Usually pulls the poor sap into the back alley of the joint under the pretense of a friendly chat about the game in order to force his recompense out with his fists, obviously thinking he can wipe away his imagined disgrace by taking a swing or two at anyone. That location pretty much takes care of the problem of not being seen by anyone, and so no one is really able to call him out on his bullshit.

All is good. Conditions are perfect.

*Weak people disgust me.*

I'd mustered up enough courage to face her and tell her one day, only for her to

put me down with that one sentence as she left.

Maybe she was right. I've never been in a fight—a physical one—once before in my entire life. I've just never had a fight escalate to that degree, or haven't been brave enough to escalate it myself. In truth, that is probably why she had called me weak.

So it follows that I probably need to beat someone up to get rid of that weakness. It is the swiftest proof of strength that I can think of, and since then I've planned and planned for the moment. Hitting someone as hard as I can is probably the last thing of importance I haven't done in my seventeen years of being alive.

And so, I began to draw the kid out.

It was already night when I went to the arcade, and he was already there, like clockwork. I beat him in the same game, over and over again, for what must have been an hour. And when the time finally came for him to pull me outside, I followed him out of the store, slowly, almost hesitatingly. There is a show to this. A proper moment that appears only when he least expects it. So he gives me a wordless eyefuck as I step out, his height lending it an added effectiveness. This, in itself, is a development, since there's usually some amount of cajoling involved. There are no words tonight. He leads me to the back alley as I follow with a feigned hesitation.

Alright. Calm down. It's almost a given that he's going to try and hurt me tonight. Still, hurting him back gives me just a little bit of uncertainty. But even that is soon willed away. After all, if he's really going to hurt me, no one can judge which is crime and which is punishment. He pulls me deep into the alley, the light from the street barely reaching us.

"Hey," I say dully, which causes him to look back over his shoulder. I take the small wooden club from behind my back, hidden under my shirt, and give his head as great a swing as I can give.

A crack, and then a dull thud as the kid falls to the ground flat on his face like a ragdoll. A few moments later, blood starts to blossom from the wound on his head, flowing down his scalp and into the concrete alley, tainting the trash and

discarded needles around his head. It only takes me a few seconds to conclude that he isn't moving again anytime soon. "What?" I can't believe it. I only whacked him once with the wooden club, but that was pretty much instant death wasn't it?

"What the fuck?" It is a genuine remark, provoked by the moment. I mean, look at it. It's an accident is what it is. I didn't intend to kill him! It isn't murder, surely?

"I never knew..." ...what? That humans were so fragile, and that they could die so simply and easily?

But this is the sort of thing that these kinds of people always turn to, but why am I the one that ended up killing someone? They've always resorted to violence, but this is my first time! How can this be even remotely fair?! Am I just unlucky, or are these people just too lucky? Is there bad luck going around for everyone?

I don't know anymore.

I don't know.

I don't know!

I don't know anything about this mistake, or this state of affairs, or the question of whether this was a crime or not, or even the simple question of how to proceed further. But I do know one thing. The police will treat this as a murder, no matter how much I plead that this is an accident and no real sin. Soon, they'll catch me. And that will be that.

"No. I've never done anything wrong. It'd be wrong of them to just lock me away." But still, the entire thing needs to be hidden. Thankfully, there aren't any witnesses to take care of. All I need do is hide this corpse, and the normality of my everyday life can be restored.

But where to hide it, and how? There's not a single place you can stuff a body here without being seen. I could start a fire, but even that's not foolproof these days. Not to mention it would start a commotion here that I most definitely do not want. Damn it all. If this were somewhere in the forest or the mountains, I could count on the animals to just eat all of it up—

Just, you know...eat it, natural like.

“Maybe eating it would do the trick?” Man, the answer is so simple, I can dance! I am such a genius tonight! Doing it that way means there’d be little of a corpse to be found.

So then, the question is still “how?” There’s just too much meat. There’s no way I can eat all of that meat alone before morning comes. Then, maybe I should just start with the blood. Yeah, the blood.

I lean down on the body, letting my lips wrap around the kid’s open wound, where blood continues to spill like water from a leaky plastic. I begin to suck, and the thick blood is sticky upon my lips and throat. But after a few seconds of it, I cough up all that I’d just drunk.

Goddamn it. I didn’t even drink too much. Sticks to my damn throat and I can’t drink it easy like water. If I keep at it like this, I could block my breathing and die here just like him. Oh god, what should I do? Can’t eat the meat, can’t even drink the blood... My teeth are chattering as I think, and I can’t do anything except shiver here like a pathetic loon.

I’ve killed someone.

I can’t even hide the act.

I’ve killed someone.

This is the way my life ends. In chaos and confusion with no easy exit in sight.

“Why do you not take your fill until the very end?” says a voice that comes upon me suddenly from behind. When I turn to see who owns it, I sight a man wearing a black coat, cloaklike in its immensity. The long umbral silhouette he casts inside the alley as he stands against the streetlight looks of a cruelly made body that not even his massive coat can hide. His eyes are gaunt and clouded, bearing the weight of an eternity.

“Do arbitrary rules blind you still, keeping you tethered from your true nature?” he continues to ask, looking not at the bloodied corpse behind me, but only at me.

“Rules?” I say in a whisper. Come to think of it, why *didn’t* I think anything

was wrong with just thinking to eat the corpse? I didn't even feel disgusted when I dared to drink the blood. What told me to put my lips on the worsening wound, but feel nothing about it? I tried to eat someone, which is probably a crime worse than murder by popular definitions. One need only look at the number of killers who also decide to cannibalize on their victims, and it's obviously not a pretty high number. No, most people wouldn't even think of it. Obviously because cannibalism is such a strange, alien act.

"But I thought it was the natural thing to do," I find myself saying inadvertently.

"Indeed. This means you are special, for you to have chosen such a course of action after a murder. Most would have already run, confused and pathetic. But you faced your act in your own manner. Even if it is a manner that decidedly breaks from the consensus, it is an act from which you cannot be blamed for."

The man in the black coat takes a step inside the alley, a step toward me. Why do his words sound so sweet, almost making me forget that he is a witness to my crime?

"Me? Special?"

"Yes. Consensus has no hold over you. A reality of rules binds those who deviate, their acts called a sin by men of ignorance. But to the deviant, his is the most natural thing in the world. So where is evil in this equation?" He nears me, placing a hand on my head, and I do nothing to stop him. Deviants and lunatics and degenerates and fools. I am none of those clueless men. But still, if I am truly mad, there was nothing I could do about killing the kid, now was there?

"I'm not normal...different," I mumble.

"You are. And if you are so broken as you claim, *then you only stand to profit by breaking completely.*"

His voice digs deep inside my brain, my heart, and the rest of my body, ringing with the sound of some spellbinding sorcery. He is right. He had always been right. And when I take his words into me, my trembling and my fear for what comes after this are expunged, replaced with a joyous sensation, like I've gained a new lease on life. My vision turns white before me. My throat dries, and even breathing as hard as I can puts little air in my lungs. I feel like my body is being

is burned by a pain travelling through all my veins and arteries, but it's a glorious pain no drug can hope to match.

The inscrutable, cruel-featured man holds my head in place with a hand that I know can crush me. And under those hands, I crumble to tears in a manner that has never happened in my life entire. The tears are warm, joy-made. The scream that wanted to exit my lungs speaks of some primal passion.

This. This is the time and place where I break.

The boy consumed the corpse in an hour. He used no tools save the power of his own teeth and jaw, devouring something much larger than himself wholly and completely. His tongue does not tell him the quality of it, of its succulence or otherwise. He finds value only in the physical exertion, the mastication of his subject.

“An hour? You are excellent.” The black-coated man examines the boy’s handiwork thoroughly, bearing witness to all of it before speaking. The boy turns to him lazily, his mouth and face thick with red blood, both from his subject and from his own, borne from the breaking of his own chin, and the tearing of his own flesh, showing the fruit of the haste and difficulty of his act. He, however, does not seem to know that this has even happened. The boy tore into the corpse, never stopping for even a moment, leaving nothing except a few drops of blood in the darkened alley.

“But that excellence will still define you,” the tall man continues. “Becoming aware of your origin by yourself will only take you so far. One must put the catalyst in the soul, awaken the vital spark.” The boy hears the man’s words, looking at him through now hollowed eyes. “You are still on the brink, that empty, hollow boundary. Henceforth, you shall be the man-eater, from now and until death. But you do not wish for it to end there. You will be a man not bound to the senses of the rabble, someone transcendent. A unique and new life must emerge. Do you not want to claim it?”

The man’s words are spellbinding and lyrical. They engrave themselves directly into the boy’s now numb thoughts, pressing inside like a subliminal force of authority. Bathed in his and his victim’s blood, the boy nods sluggishly

in assent, an act that can be compared to a prayer to his own god of salvation.

“It is done. You shall be the first.” The man only needs to nod, and raise his right hand from its place over the boy for the bloody ritual to be concluded. The boy dares to ask him one question.

“Who...who the hell are you, man?”

The man in the black cloak remains motionless as he answers. His voice seems then to be powered by some demiurgic force, and through him that force speaks, resounding through the alleyway with the whispering of ages.

“A mage. My name is Sōren Alaya.”

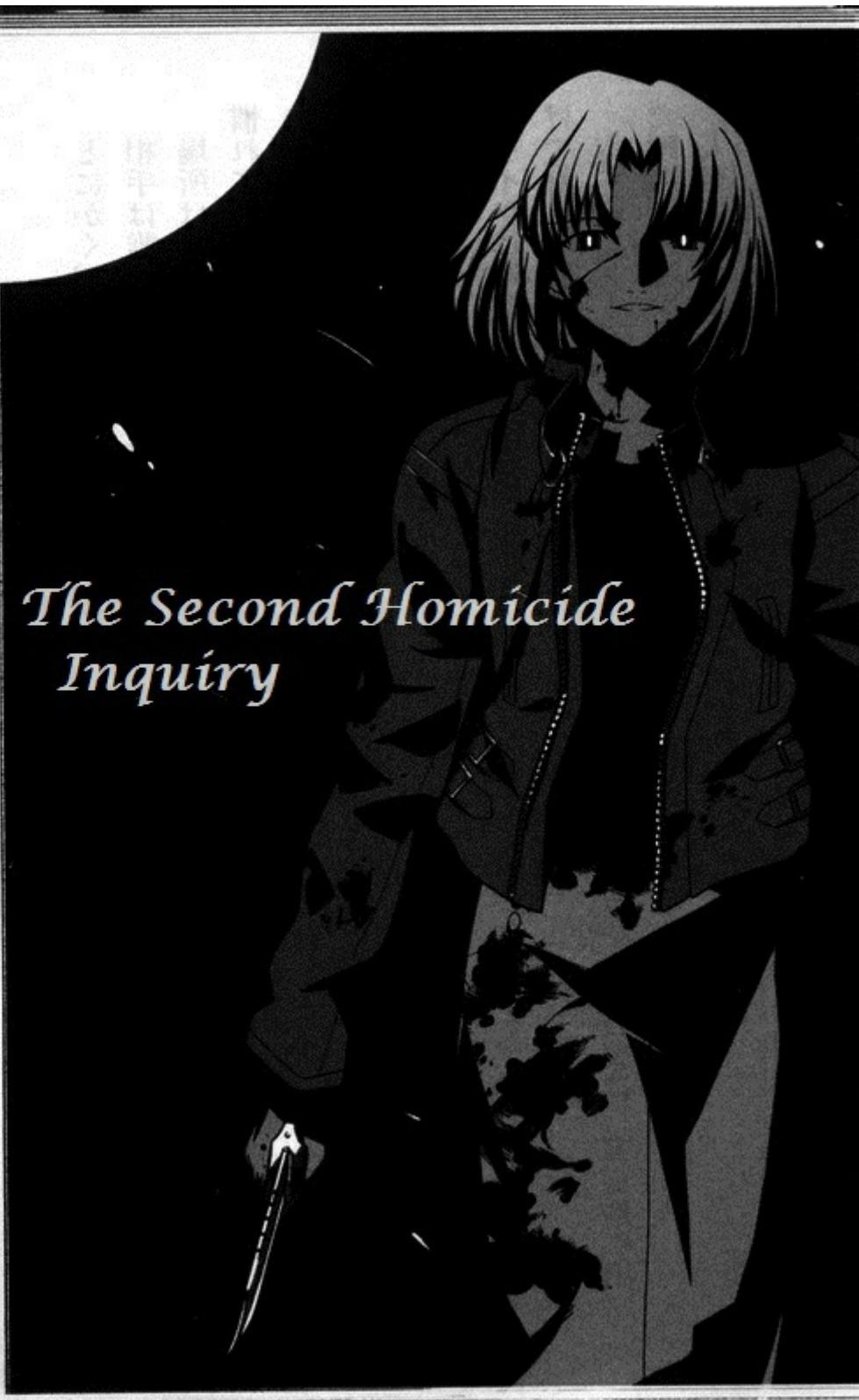
At last, the man asks the boy’s true name.

The boy tells him.

And within his stonehearted face, the man finds it in himself to smile. “Leo. Regrettable. You lack one last step in being a lion.” There is a genuine melancholy in the words, even as he grins.

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*The Second Homicide  
Inquiry*



*Only our frozen sighs played between us As we watch our heartbeats fade slowly into stillness*

*Soon, all of the dear and treasured memories Will become mere regrets, weak and soon to fade.*

*Even the memory of rain:*

*Of an endless gray veil seen after school Even the memory of sunset:*

*Of a classroom ablaze in orange light*

*Even the memory of snow:*

*Of the white night of first contact, and the black umbrella*

*Beside me you would smile, and that would be enough To bid my soul rest, turbulent though it was Beside me you would walk, and that would be enough To bid the rift between us close, distant though it was*

*Once, a moment in time*

*We stopped for shade, warm unmoving sunlight peeking through leaves And there, as you laughed, you said that one day we'd stand in the same place They were words that I've yearned to hear for so long But now it is but the fleeting remains of the day*

## Prologue

1999, February 1.

It's the beginning of the last year of a millennium, and the tip of a new millennium's inception. And as with most arbitrary shifts and divisions of temporal measurements, people start to cling to the words of prophets and doomsayers, whether out of personal profit or the osmotic and infectious effect of a panic in slow-boil. Wrapped as the city currently is in this nearly tangible layer of artificial menace, as well as a more easily perceived winter whose temperatures have reached levels atypical from the past few years, I, Mikiya Kokutō, have decided to spend this night walking together with Shiki.

Winter is at its height, and these days, the sun is already well set after five in the afternoon, granting an early evening veil to the entire city. My breath is visible in white puffs before my mouth, and beside me Shiki is in the same state. The both of us are, I suppose, ever reliable (some would even say *predictable*) in how we dress. A dark-colored coat worn above a black turtleneck sweater paired with black slacks for me. While Shiki wears a blue kimono coupled with a red waist-length leather jacket, all the while having a pair of high combat boots donned. I've long since given up asking her if she's ever cold in that attire. I've seen her in it ever since three years ago. The heat or the cold never seem to affect her as much as it does anyone else.

Shiki offered to meet me on my way home after finishing work, which is not something she often does, and is an act I often associate with some ulterior motive on her part.

“Alright, out with it. There’s something really important up if you can’t muster enough patience to wait for me back at your place. Taking the trouble to meet up with me so near the office is a pretty rare event.”

“It’s nothing, really. It’s just been a little...dangerous lately, so I thought I’d see you home.” Her face is sullen as she casts her eyes about the surrounding area, never really looking at me. The wind blows a lonely breeze our way, and Shiki’s kimono flutters slightly.

Shiki Ryōgi has always donned that style, ever since the day I first met her in high school. It always makes her look kind of strange, but I have to admit that it goes well with her height (around 160cm). Her hair frames her face, and always looks to be haphazardly cut to terminate at collar height. Like her hair, her eyes are a threateningly deep black. As if to contrast all of this, though, she always speaks in a tone as rough as she likes, and almost without a thought for the next word. It always throws people for a loop the first time around. Now, she retains a posture more dignified and noble than beautiful, even as she walks and surveys the streets still partly awash in quickly retreating sunlight, as if she were a carnivore on some kind of hunt.

I call her attention. “Shiki, you’ve been acting kind of funny lately.” “How funny can I be if you aren’t even laughing?”

She says this lazily, lacking her usual spirit. Normally, she’d glance over at me just to enjoy my usual frown after her wit, but she keeps her eyes occupied elsewhere. Well, if she’s not in the mood to talk, then so be it. I keep pace alongside her, and proceed without another word. Shiki leads the both of us toward the direction of the train station near her house, which at this hour must still be packed. The way there, however, is as dead as midnight, with only me and Shiki walking along the narrow back streets. Without the lights on in the shops, and the street lamps, you’d think there was some kind of calamity. There’s a reason for it, though. I would guess it’s the same reason Shiki thinks she needs to walk me back home.

Lone people who walk at night are being reported missing or turning up dead. Now, given the usually low crime rate in the area, this would have been shelved as something of a statistical anomaly. If it wasn’t so similar to the winter three years ago.

In my first year in high school, there was a serial killer that put the city in a bit of a panic. He'd only appear in the night, and conduct violent ritual killings on people for no discernible reason. All in all, he killed seven people. Despite the numerous inquiries and cooperation with the media, the police's desperate attempt to catch him failed, and a solid suspect never materialized. With no other murders fitting the pattern, it was assumed the serial killer had stopped, and the case was buried cold.

The first murder started around summer four years ago, and the killer went to ground at around winter three years ago. I remember it being a cold February, with me and Shiki about to enter our second year. It was only afterwards that Shiki got into a car accident, and lapsed into a coma. As for me, I eventually graduated from high school, and moved on to college, but it only took a month for me to drop out, and soon after, I found employment with Miss Tōko. Shiki herself recovered from her coma only last year in summer. For me, the entire affair with the serial killer is a thing of the past.

I imagine, however, that it isn't the same for Shiki. To her, it would have only seemed to be half a year ago. The recent strings of killings fit the same gruesome pattern as four years ago, and the TV news has been playing it up as a return of the old culprit, with all the graphics and reenactments that come along with such a high profile story, almost as if the news networks were just lying in wait to spring the story fresh on their viewers again. Still, I can't help but notice Shiki looking grimmer by the day the more she hears of it. I've only ever seen her like that once, three years ago, before the accident.

When *Shiki* Ryōgi, still containing her other, masculine, **Shiki** personality, told me that she was a murderer.

The train station is a taste of normalcy when we get there, as it is filled with all the usual number of people. Unlike the residential district we had just passed through, the station is brightly lit and packed with people going to and fro in a hurry, and the activity spills into the surrounding commercial district. Only one of few places in the neighborhood that you could count on the serial killer not making an appearance. Yet even here, the influence is felt. The way people draw closer together, as if to close ranks, and the touch, however slight, of fear on all their faces, guarded though they may be. The night's just begun, and rush hour

ensures a nearly endless stream of people.

Passing the busy station and making our way through the commercial district, we pass an appliance store, the television on display showing the evening news. At a glance I already see what I expect: another feature story on the killer. While I quickly pay it no heed, Shiki is led to halt in front of it, her eyes affixed on the screen, so I reluctantly stop alongside her. “Mikiya, take a look at this,” Shiki says, with a chortle, “they’re calling him a murderous monster.” She’s right. In fairly large letters, bulleted by an X mark in the bottom of the TV, it says *How the Murderous Monster Began*. “I guess they thought just ‘killer’ wouldn’t make people nervous enough. A murder count exceeding ten is nothing to laugh at, I know, but don’t you think they’re being a bit sensationalist, though?”

With an eyebrow raised, Shiki finally looks at me. “Well, yeah, that’s obvious. But I think they’re kind of right, though. If anyone right now deserved to be called a monster, it would be this guy. He wants the attention, the spectacle. He’s glad for it. Monsters rarely need a reason. The victims certainly never got one before they died. That’s why you can’t really call this a murder.” She returns her attention to the television, seeing the faint image of herself reflected on the glass surface of the screen.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Massacre and murder can be different. Maybe you’ve forgotten, Kokutō? That a lifetime only has room for one real murder.” She looks into my eyes then, as straight as she can manage. Normally, she looks quite detached, almost sleepy, as if she’s looking at something far away. But now there is an intensity in her black eyes, a pleading to some ancient memory.

“One real murder...” I allow my voice to trail away. I definitely recall hearing something like that from her before, but when? And where? It was only long after this particular moment, when I can look back, and regret. Maybe if I remembered it, at that moment, all of what followed could have been avoided.

“Never mind,” Shiki finally says after a few seconds. “It’s not important. Anyway, let’s get ourselves home. I just woke up, and if I don’t eat something I’m never gonna calm down.”

“Wait, you just woke up? What happened to school? Did you forget that it’s a

Monday today, or did you just decide to sleep over?"

Her face breaks into a sly smile. "Calm, deep breaths," she pleads mockingly. "I was at school this morning, c'mon. I meant my afternoon nap. Actually, I never told you, but my grades have been getting better since November, you know? C'mon, tell me you're surprised." I nod, genuinely taken aback. Her grades had been slipping as badly as her attendance rate, and I was worried she wouldn't make it by year's end. When I nod, she makes a self-satisfied sound, and puts her hands inside her coat pocket.

"Right, then a reward's in order, then!" declares Shiki out of the blue. "Azaka kept bragging to me about this fancy joint you took her to down in Akasaka. And whaddya know? I've actually always wanted to go and try it out. Oh, how I so wanted to kill her then."

The disturbing thing about Shiki saying that is knowing full well that she has a knife and has used it before. Before I can have a say in the matter, she grabs me by the arm and leads me away. I'm not entirely sure where she's leading me just yet, but if her previous remark is any indication, it's to Akazaka, where half of my paycheck will be no more than shattered hopes and dreams in the face of one night's meal, and it doesn't look like there's any stopping her. Silently, I curse Azaka for telling Shiki about where I took her on New Year's.

Oh well, might as well enjoy this. After all, it feels like it's been such a long time since we had a real date. In fact, the last time may well have been four years ago, back in high school, when she still had the boy **Shiki** inside her. She reminds me of him tonight actually, and I don't think to question where this could have come from. Beyond the aloofness that she had earlier this afternoon, I didn't see anything out of place.

So we started February with an expensive dinner, and a night walking around town, just being together and enjoying ourselves like it was the last night we were allowed to do so.

## **The Second Homicide Inquiry - I**

*- April 1995. I met her.-*

It has been a week since the night that me and Shiki chanced upon that news report on TV. The label the news gave to the killer, a “murderous monster,” ended up sticking, and lately, everybody’s been using it, even Daisuke Akimi, my uncle, who at 5am in the morning, now sits in my modest apartment, helping himself to a slice of French toast that I made for him as he skims the morning paper. The date on the broadsheet reads February 8. Unfortunately, in the six intervening days since he’s received the moniker, the ‘murderous monster’ has claimed six more victims, one for each day.

“God, they’re really sticking with this name, aren’t they?” remarks Daisuke. “I thought the department made a deal not to get the names of the vics out so quick too. Makes the job harder, you know?” To hear him talk would make you think he was discussing some other person’s case, which is far from the truth. In fact, he has a relationship with it as close as kin. He was the primary detective on the case three years ago, and the brass have seen fit to saddle it with him again, being the most informed officer they have. It only makes sense.

“Are you sure it’s alright for you to be lazing about here, Daisuke? I mean, I’m looking at the front page of that paper, and it’s the story of the last night’s fatality right there.” I say as I eat my breakfast at the table, facing Daisuke. His face is hidden behind the newspaper, but I know that he heard me.

“I’ve been running around checking leads for a week now, and every day there’s a fresh murder. Let the SDF handle it, why don’t they? I need a little break ‘round this time sometimes, anyway. Thanks again for the breakfast, little buddy.” I watch as he takes his coffee mug from the table, and see it disappear behind the newspaper before he gulps and places it back. All of this is pretty much standard procedure any time he comes here. He takes a break for thirty minutes for breakfast, he reads the paper, he chats, and he goes out. He used to do this at my folks’ place back when I was in high school too, and he saw fit to bring the tradition here, not that I mind.

“I’m sure the SDF would just completely botch it all up anyway. You’re the best detective the Metro Police has.”

“Eh, I’m not so sure about that. But whatever the case, a man has limits, and I’m pretty sure hauling a three year old case out of the graveyard to haunt the motherfucker who tried to solve it is damn near toeing the line.” He quickly closes the newspaper and folds it as he continues. “God, I just need to talk about this to someone that ain’t police. Listen, Mikiya, what I’m about to tell you is really classified stuff, but I trust you. Don’t even think about telling it to your friends or family, you got it?”

I nod. Though I wouldn’t think of letting anything of what he’s about to say leak out, he’s obviously never heard of the story about King Midas and his donkey ears.

He begins. “Right, so like last time, this one’s a complete stone whodunit. No suspects, which means no motive. No connections. Only one weakass witness, even in the killing spree in the past seven days. Last time, the only leads we got were your school emblem and the perp’s skin, which didn’t bingo a match in the offender database. But...well, I’m not sure just yet, but he might be changing up his game.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, you know how he’s been nabbing citizens since last fall, right? We weren’t sure yet that it was him back then, so the media didn’t latch on to the story until the killings started this year, when he started getting sloppy. Especially in the past week.”

“Leaving evidence, you mean,” I suggest.

“Which is weird, right? We can’t put a face to the fucker for four years going now, but now he decides to change his pattern? Doesn’t sound right. It might just be a copycat.”

“But that can’t be right,” I muse, thinking back on how Daisuke described it to me four years ago. “The exact manner of how the victims died hasn’t been leaked to the public. I only know because you told me. If this guy was a copycat, he couldn’t have known exactly how to conduct the murders.”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” Daisuke says with a resigned sigh. “I wonder, though. The murders four years ago struck me as less ritualistic and more... like someone who was just getting used to what he could do, and he decided to play around, you know? He was at least leaving a body to be found back then. Now...” he clears his throat, and shakes his head, as if to rid his mind of a self-made image, before he continues. “...now he’s just leaving severed arms or legs. If he’s trying to clean up his act, then why take all that time to hide a body but leave the limbs intentionally?”

“Calling card, maybe? A signature for the police to know him by? He’s gloating,” I think out loud.

“Yeah, that’s where my mind automatically goes, too. But it didn’t look like the limbs were cut, that’s for sure. There’s no clean cut, or even the signs of multiple attempts to hack them off. They look like they were... torn off, or twisted right out.” Daisuke smiles then, and makes a chuckle, the heaviness in his features leaving him for a moment. “Heh, heard any escaped alligator urban legends out there lately, Mikiya?”

“Nah,” I say, chuckling now too. “If I do, though, you can get lost. I’m keeping it as a pet just to spite you.” I drink from my coffee now too, the temperature finally becoming agreeable. I use the moment to hide my expression when my mind wanders to four years ago...and Shiki.

It was four years ago when Shiki told me she was a murderer. But that couldn’t have been true. I can’t believe she would kill anyone. Not truly. She was never ready to swing that knife down on anybody. I’ve always put my faith in her. But, if that’s true, then why does my mind now go back to thoughts of her?

“Your witness,” I say quickly, as if doing so would banish the thought from my mind. “You said you had a weak one. What’s that about?”

“Yeah, from last week’s incident downtown over at commercial. Place is packed full of people at most hours so it must have been pretty hard for the killer to hide what he was doing. Sure enough, even though the crime scene was an alley, someone passed by. Witness managed to see the perp booking it after the murder took place, said he wore a kimono. Actually though, the witness can’t say for certain whether the suspect was actually a guy or a girl. Like I said, no legs on that info just yet.” Daisuke shrugs as he says this, and rests his head on a hand propped up on the table. “It’d be nice if we can at least bring in some viable targets for questioning. The brass is pretty hung up on getting the ‘monster’ and tying this up quick. Far as I know, the pressure’s coming all the way from city hall.”

“A red ball. Media coverage is getting kinda crazy hysterical too.” “Best road to stress, I tell ya. Gotta thank you for this, Mikiya.”

“It’s why I’m here.” Yet even as Daisuke shares the new information about what the witness saw, he returns it unknowingly to Shiki. Who else do I know that walks around at night in a kimono? My fingers clutching the coffee cup seem to go numb for a moment, but I manage to retain my composure.

“One more thing I gotta ask you,” says Daisuke, adopting a more hushed tone now. “Now Mikiya, I know you know your fair share about the drug trade here in Tokyo. Whoever’s slinging the best shit, who the players are, that sort of thing.”

“I guess so,” I venture hesitantly. “I mean, more than the average person, sure. But I’m sure you’ve got a pool of guys over at your narcotics bureau better acquainted with that than me.”

He waves a hand in the air dismissively. “A bunch of conservative old hacks playing at understanding what games the kids play now, and deluding themselves that buy-busts are the ultimate answer. That includes me.” He gives a mocking chuckle before pulling out a polaroid photograph from his coat pocket, setting it down on the table for me to see.

In the photograph are two evidence bags, one containing something that looks

like a bunch of stamps, and another with some kind of grass inside. The labels on the bags have the words “mescaline” and “THC” written prominently on them, alongside how many grams of it is stored, and below that is the chain of custody for the evidence. I recognize them easily enough.

“The stamps are LSD, right? The other is weed I’m pretty sure.”

“Well, kinda like weed. The forensics guys told me that the THC and CHC content in the hemp are very low.”

“So it’s not marijuana.” It can’t have been. You would have to have enough THC, the psychoactive substance found in weed, for it to qualify. “It’s probably something more like *tochigishiro*.”

“Which is what?”

“A specially bred strain of hemp developed here in Japan. Because hemp growing is regulated heavily by the prefectural governments, they’ve got a pretty strict ceiling on how much THC should be in usable hemp, which is at 1%. The hemp that used to be grown natively here in Japan usually sat at around 1.2 to 1.8%. So, to comply with the new prefectural policies, they developed a low-THC strain in Hiroshima, called *tochigishiro*. Obviously it didn’t stop illegal plantations or smuggling of marijuana inside the country.” Daisuke nods, his eyes showing their characteristic concentration. He’s following along with a genuine curiosity now. “So what does the picture have to do with anything?” I ask.

“Most of the murder victims this past week had some in their possession on time of death,” Daisuke explains. “But hey, what do I know? They’re kids fooling around at night so maybe it’s no surprise, eh?”

“Unfair generalizations aren’t going to get you anywhere, Daisuke.”

“Which is why I’m turning to you for opinions. You know these street hoppers better than I do.”

“To be honest, I don’t really know about that. I haven’t been in contact with any of the street level dealer guys for at least half a year. They might have changed up their boys, especially the guys who sell acid. They do rotations so they don’t get caught so easily. The cocktail slingers too.” “Cocktails are two

drugs mixed together in one dose, right?”

“Yeah. I hear the popular thing right now is speedballs: when they mix cocaine with heroine or morphine in one needle. Powerful stuff. Very dangerous too, if you aren’t careful.”

Daisuke narrows his eyes. “You’re suspiciously knowledgeable about all this. You aren’t taking any, are you?” he asks. Though I’m pretty sure he isn’t serious, I decide to answer him truthfully anyway.

“Do I look like I do? If I was a dope fiend, you’d know it with one look at me. I’m a pretty easy guy to read, or so people tell me. I’m not one to try drugs. I’ve just got a...well, an old high school friend who knows a lot about it.”

“Fine, fine, I believe you,” he says dismissively as he stands up, though it doesn’t escape my notice that he noted my hesitation in saying Gakuto’s name. “Anyway, gotta get back to work soon or they’ll light my ass up. Last question, though. Is weed an upper or a downer?”

I sigh, thinking regretfully on how little this supposed detective uncle of mine knows about the whole thing, despite being on the job for years now. “That’s a question I’m sure even your narcotics people can answer, but whatever. It actually isn’t clear what weed is. Different people have different reactions. For some it’s a stimulant, and to others it’s a downer, and also a hallucinogen. For a few people, it doesn’t even leave any strong effect. Other drugs have been extensively studied and their effects documented, but the THC in weed is the only thing that remains a mystery.”

“Heh, thanks for that. I’m a homicide guy, not in narcotics, so I don’t know everything about it,” he says as he grabs and puts on his coat. “I’ll be sure to bone up on it, though. Looks like I’m gonna need it soon enough if the stuff keeps getting found on victims. Might be enough to form an angle on the case.” He gives me a short wave as he walks toward the entrance of the house, and I wave him back. He opens the door, admitting the noise of raindrops assaulting the rooftops of the buildings outside. “God, fucking rain again?” Daisuke complains as he heads out and closes the door behind him.

“Just has to spill the beans to me, doesn’t he?” I whisper to myself. The conversation with him left a gloomy undercurrent to the room, though, and as the

dreary dawn light peeks in through the window, I finish my breakfast and get a sudden urge to take the day off. I quickly call Miss Tōko up and inform her. Her reply is curt.

*“Whatever you plan on doing, take it easy.”* She says it like an order, not a mere suggestion. Before I get a chance to assure her, there is a click on the line; she’s put the phone down. She knows what I’m up to for sure. She’s always had strangely accurate intuition.

There’s only one good reason I need the day off today.

I haven’t seen any sign of Shiki for a week now.

The past week had seen a new murder turn up every day, and since it all started, she hasn’t come back to her room, or her old Ryōgi family estate. I can’t get in touch with her, and nobody I know seems to have seen her. It doesn’t take a genius to see what reason she could have for doing it.

If the murderous monster really is the same serial killer from four years ago, then Shiki is out there, searching for answers. But I don’t even know who this monster prowling the streets is. And I know that the memories related to her old Shiki personality have all vanished along with him, which means we’ll never be able to prove if she was related to those crimes or not.

Maybe I’m not the one that can break this case wide open. But there are far too many memories that will be betrayed if I wait any longer. Shiki’s disappearance heralds something far worse. I can feel it. And before that happens, I need to find the truth. Me. Because this isn’t someone else’s problem. From four years ago until today, this has always been mine and Shiki’s problem. We just kept prolonging it, afraid to face it. So to understand it, I need to start investigating, not for someone else, but for my own sake.

I step outside the house, seeing the rain cover everything in an unceasing grey veil. I pop open my black umbrella and travel to the crime scenes of the past week. I reach last night’s spot, an alley in one of the busier portions of downtown. People are walking the sidewalk as if nothing had happened last night, trying not to notice the alley which still has policemen standing guard and yellow police lines stretched over the mouth of the entrance, and a similarly yellow tarp covering the top of the entire alleyway. Preserving the crime scene

for at least a day, they can do no more than that. I leave, and head to the other crime scenes, hoping to find them less guarded. Luckily, the police have abandoned them, and I'm able to pry through them without notice.

By the time I reach my third crime scene, I barely notice that much of the day has passed, and it is already early afternoon. If I wanted to pay all the places a visit and give them a thorough search, it'd probably take me until late tonight. This is all useless. The crime scenes are open and they're more than likely already tampered, if not through daily traffic, then surely through the continuous day of rain. But without a single clue, what can I really do? This investigation is kid's stuff for now, but before I take it up a notch, I have to make sure not to leave a stone unturned. And so with just my umbrella for company, I wander alleyways tainted by murder.

The late winter rain is icy cold, and hasn't let up the entire day. The rain in this month has always had a special melancholy attached to it for me. It's had that for me for three years. After all, it was this month, three years ago, when I lost her.

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“I...I want to kill you.”

It was a very gentle smile.

The girl in the red kimono had a knife pointed at me, hovering above my neck. In one terrifyingly brief moment, *Shiki Ryōgi* raised the blade. I, lying on the ground while she straddled me, could do nothing but to look into the eyes of my coming death. Like a guillotine, the knife blade shone in the rain, and she brought it down in a strike swift and true.

But the knife did not pierce my neck, did not strike home in my flesh, but instead stopped unsteadily an inch or two before making its mark. “Why?” *Shiki* whispered in a voice incredulous and unbelieving. The totality of the question was left unvoiced. *Why can't I kill you?*

In that moment, I felt the fear ebbing away slowly, replaced with a growing pity at this girl, whose existence was at once given meaning by a desire for

murder and her disgust of it. For a moment, I forgot to breathe. But it was only for one, lucky moment.

I saw her look at her own arm, and in those eyes there was nothing but anger and contempt at her own actions. She took her other hand, letting it clutch her blade arm, as if to force it to action. *This time, I thought, this time it will be the end.*

But something interrupted us. A man approached beside us, seeming to come from nowhere at all, wearing a great black coat like a monk. With a single small gesture of his hand, she sent *Shiki* flying from me, using some unseen force. He spoke.

“Fool. This weakening does not become you,” he said in a low, tormented voice. The man helped me up, his strong grip on my arm lifting me effortlessly. That seemed to awaken some predatory instinct in *Shiki* who pulled herself up from the rain-soaked ground, and launched herself toward the man with redoubled vigor. In an instant, *Shiki* was beside the tall man, jumping up and aiming her knife at his forehead, and slashed in one quick motion.

A thin red line ran through his forehead then, and blood poured out slowly like sand. After she slashed him, *Shiki* quickly ran past him, and retreated to a distance he could not reach. They glared at each other, the tall man in the black coat barely even registering he was wounded. Amused, he even gave an observant chuckle.

“Would you stay your hand even for me? Then you are still useless to me.” The man then took me by the arm and ran. Behind us, *Shiki* gave chase. But the man’s speed is too fast, almost as if we were flying. But we couldn’t have been, because my feet were still on the ground, struggling to keep up with him. Eventually, we were out of the Ryōgi estate’s grounds, and only then did he let go of me. Then he looked at me, as if to say that if I went home now, all would be safer for me.

“Far too early to break her,” he murmured, but even his murmurs were a low audible rumble. “The duality of the spiral of conflict has always been her destined end.” Leaving me with those words, the man walks away and disappears with only a few steps, as if letting the shadows of the surrounding

bamboo grove swallow him.

The asphalt road home stretched out welcomingly before me, but behind me, I could hear *Shiki* fast approaching. I could've gone home. I could've left her. But I chose to be with her. I still don't know if that was the right thing to do. But in the end, she couldn't swing the knife down. I turned without reluctance to the sound of her approaching footfalls. And when she caught up to me, there was surprise in her face, but more than that, there was confusion. Then a burning clarity. There were words exchanged then, words that couldn't be forgotten. But her last sentence to me was this.

"If I can't make you go away," she said, under the unceasing rain. In the distance, closing fast, she spots the headlights of an approaching car. She laughed. A weak, bitter laugh. "I have to make myself go away." She runs toward the middle of the street.

The car approached fast, and she presented herself in front of it, lit brightly on one side by the headlights. The rain fell hard, but even it could not overcome the keening sound of the brakes. It was too late. It was over in a second. The girl who fell in the wet asphalt looked less like *Shiki*, and more like some lifeless, warmthless doll, broken and ruined. Right there, at that moment, I knew no more painful and regretful moment. Her eyes before the impact had tears in them—or was it just the rain? And yet, even having seen that, I could not find it in myself to cry.

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The evening only brings more rain and less clues than I had hoped for, but is only in line with what I expected. It is cold tonight, more so than the past ones have been. A good thing I brought my umbrella.

The black umbrella...the same one I was using when I first met *Shiki*. She had been looking up at the sky that night, but seemed to see neither the stars nor the moon, as if she had frozen in place, and all was right with the world.

# / 1

- May. -

*- I've become acquainted with Mikiya Kokutō. I knew I'd like him ever since I first saw him. He talked to me without reservation or hesitation, with a smile uncalculating or plotting. He's perfect. -*

“More rain again?” I grumble as I seek cover from the growing intensity of the shower. The volume of the raindrops as they impact the roofs of the buildings starts to build towards a crescendo. Luckily, a nearby convenience store provides some temporary shelter, and of course, the umbrella bin outside proves to be a welcome convenience indeed. I help myself to one umbrella, a cheap plastic one the owner is unlikely to miss fondly. My objective is lost, though. Hard to track the smell of blood mixed with the rain. Still, there’s nothing to be gained from standing here the entire day, so I continue to walk.

It’s February 8, and dawn is just breaking. The streets still lack their usual foot or vehicle traffic, and the silhouettes of people I share the street with are few and far between. Even my own shadow, projected by the dim lights of the passing neon and fluorescent, feels like a hazy illusion, almost incomprehensible in the rain. After putting some distance between myself and the generous convenience store, I stop for a while to take stock of myself.

I’ve got a cheap plastic umbrella, borrowed; a wet and dirtied leather jacket, and a pretty good kimono soiled by thick dirt and mud at the hem and waist.

Well, I can't really expect to be clean after spending a week sleeping exclusively on alleys. My appearance is one thing, but my odor is entirely another. And man, I smell exactly like three-day old sweat. "Sleeping outside has got to stop today," I whisper to myself, a suggestion that, the way I say it, almost makes it sound like some kind of fun game. For the first time in a week, I laugh.

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My name is Shiki Ryōgi. Like the Taoist term "*ryōgi*" used to describe the duality of yin and yang. Yeah, my family is weird, and I'm sort of a chip off the old block. Once, I nursed another personality within me, a male one called **Shiki**. Same pronunciation, different ideogram. I'd been saddled with him since birth, a murderous personality cultivated by my strange lineage. And so since birth, I've always known of the pleasure he derived from the thought of murder. It was his passion. And in a sort of twisted way, it became mine too, as I pressed down on the dark impulse inside me, killing it over and over again to control it. I killed the self inside of me, sensing both the pleasure it gave me, and the pain. All so I could live a parody of a normal life. Murder defined me then, if not literally then figuratively. But there was always the threat of it, lurking in the rafters, tempting me with its allure.

When I was a child, perhaps the only thing that held me in check were the words of my grandfather. While my father was without a doubt a Ryōgi, he did not inherit the "blessing," as he liked to call it. So of course, when I was born, there was no prouder father, and my otherwise normal older brother was passed over for the right of succession. So I've been special ever since birth. Always left alone, but never lonely, always having the other **Shiki** for company. We were one, he and I; a girl and her shadow. So it was when I was sixteen, still fearing that I was just a mere tool for murder, that my grandfather passed away. Like me, he had the "blessing." But he had never been able to control his other self completely, and in his long years, he had hurt himself, sometimes grievously, cursed those around him, while denying what he was. It had been told to me that he and his other self switched constantly, so much so that people forgot which was truly in control, and for twenty years, he had been confined to an asylum.

But in his dying hours, he called for me. In those last moments with me, he returned to some semblance of sanity, and shared with me his only words for me,

and his last as well. And I'll never forget them. He taught me that murder was important, a great and terrible thing of monstrous weight. Since that day, I think I was able to better think on my position because of him. And perhaps my masquerading of life, while forever alone, might be accomplished after all.

Until I met Mikiya Kokutō.

When I met him in high school, it coincided with me starting to act very strangely. There was something about him, something that told me that life wasn't a thing to hide in, but to live through. I remember thinking that all would have been better, if I hadn't known. If he wasn't a promise of something far better, something I wanted that could also destroy me. I couldn't fool myself anymore after him, and neither could I fool **Shiki**. He broke me apart, and me and **Shiki** started to become more out of sync. When once, I knew exactly what I was doing when **Shiki** was in control, he eventually hid it from me, and I could recall nothing of what happened when he was in control. I would oftentimes come to my senses in the middle of the night, a bloody soaked body lying in front of me, and I, smiling. I didn't know if the serial killer that haunted the city then was me, or I just wandered into his work afterwards. Doubt started to creep in.

Eventually, Mikiya found me in the middle of such a scene, but he still believed in me, and trusted that I wasn't the killer. And it was then that I decided that his joy was just an impossible dream to tempt me. There was a confrontation between us. And then the accident, which resulted in my two-year coma.

When I awakened, I found myself unlike my previous self in small yet important ways. I had lost **Shiki**, my steadfast companion, taking his share of the memories along with him. As for the memories of my old self, they felt empty and vague, like someone else's experiences. I was hollow, like a doll. And since then, I've been trying to fill up that hollow in my soul that **Shiki** left inside me with new things. It's probably the greatest irony that the guy responsible for that going pretty well in the past half-year has to be Mikiya Kokutō, the same guy almost drove me to ruin. I'm not an empty doll anymore.

But now, something's happening that's bringing back the sins of the past. When I awakened, **Shiki's** memories were lost to me, when he "died." Though I don't really know if he has the kind of autonomy in my brain that would make it

work, it comforts me to think that he took it with him because he thought it would be a blessing to me to forget about them, to live a life unburdened by guilt. And for the most part, he was right. Something happened last New Year's though.

I encountered, fought, and lost to a mage who, against my will, returned my lost memories to me. And so...now I remember everything four years ago. How my final moments before the accident really went down. How I fell to the most extreme solution of trying to murder Mikiya Kokutō, a knife pointed high above him. How I wandered the streets at night, spoiling for a good kill. It relieves me somewhat to find that it was not me who conducted the serial killings. But then, that leaves an obviously bigger problem of who the serial killer actually was. Or is, if the news tells it true and this new one is the same guy. I still don't know who he is. Mikiya must already be suspecting me after I ran away. Hell, if you ask me, he'd have every right to. I have the shady past to back it up anyway.

So like four years ago, I wander the streets again, chasing a murderous monster that's burdening the streets with a new body every day. And if I must admit to myself why I do it, then the reason is very simple. Envy, at his willingness to snuff out a life. Jealousy, at the artfulness of his skill. Answers, if that were possible. And an end to all of this...hopefully when we decide to pounce on each other. We're all the same, us murderers. We attract each other, then we spill our blood on the floor.

It's sort of funny in a sick sense, really. Four years ago, I knew it was **Shiki** who took pleasure from the thought of murder.

But he's not inside me now, is he?

And yet, attracted to a murderous monster's acts, I'm searching him out to murder him.

Why didn't I notice it before? Why did it take so long?

**Shiki's** only thought was murder, but he never acted on it. *Now it's me who's doing it. It's me who really likes it.*

I make my stop at a love hotel, where the front desk, such as it is, is

nonexistent; rooms are selected and bills paid through a machine. The better for the anonymity of their very specific clientele. I remember Mikiya once saying to me that if you wanted to hide from someone, this was a better entry-level option than most, since they don't card you. Also, because of that, transactions go by really fast, which is better overall for me.

When I get to my room, I quickly slip off my clothing and get into the shower, taking my time in the bath. After I'm done, I lie down on the bed. And though I wasn't planning on sleeping, my fatigue and frustration loosens my grip on my ability to remain awake, and the bed is too comfortable...

I wake up to a much more darkened room, the clock in the table beside the bed reading two in the morning. It was just getting dark when I got here, so I must have slept for six hours. The room, lit only by the lamp, and the dry digital readout of the clock, is populated only by strange shadows.

“Fuck,” I whisper low under my breath, but in the noiseless room, even that can be heard. Chiding myself for oversleeping, I change back into my clothes angrily. It's not just oversleeping that's bothering me so much though. I've only been by myself for seven days, but why am I so irritated? It's hasn't been that long, has it?

“It hasn't,” I tell myself, as if saying it aloud would persuade me some how. I leave the hotel as quickly as I entered it six hours earlier, my business there done.

Just past 2am. Even the stone and concrete are asleep this time of night, but of course, the police, on the lookout for the murderous monster, are not. They'll be on the lookout for anyone suspicious, with likely orders to pat anyone down. They'd find some pretty illegal stuff in my coat, so I'm not dealing with that hassle. With that in mind, I duck inside the nearest alleyway I can find. Every avenue in this area is indicted now, and the police would have the main roads covered, so I can't use them. Of course, the murderous monster knows this too, and so like him, we travel the thieves' highway, flitting through the narrow spaces between buildings. Hopefully, we meet each other. That's the plan, anyway. Unfortunately, you tend to meet all sorts of people in alleys, and not usually the ones you'd like.

“Not a dealer, man. You got somewhere else to be,” I say as I come to an intersection between alleys. Someone’s been tailing me since a few seconds ago. And now, in this intersection, I find more corner boys, one at my front, and two more to either flank. They’ve got me right in between. I look at the one in front of me. Slow, unsteady steps. Lazy arms. Slightly cocked head. His eyes are wandering a bit. This guy is totally fucking high. I cast a quick glance at the remaining three, and find that the same is true for all of them.

“Well, can’t say I didn’t warn you.” They close in simultaneously, the entire thing obviously planned beforehand. I reach inside the pocket of my jacket, pulling out my blade, seven inches in all. I sigh before it all begins. “Well, I guess this is as good a solution for boredom as any. You all wanna get high, right? Fine. We’re all gonna have a different high tonight.” Maybe they want a quick fuck. Maybe they want some extra cash for dope. Maybe all they want to do is bash some skulls in. Far be it from me to decline that offer. At least, for a little while, I can relax, be the me that Shiki always wanted me to be, and lose myself in a moment of high. They close in on me, faster and with a purpose.

## **The Second Homicide Inquiry - II**

- May. -

- I need to write about her again. -

*- I lose myself when I see her, drinking her presence in. My fingers become numb and I forget to breathe at the sight of her. Can I die from doing so? I need only look at her, and she buries herself again in my mind like a virus. She's invaded my life. Got deep inside, this miraculously perfect girl from my high school. I think I've fallen in love. I've never even talked to her, never even heard her voice. And that emptiness weighs more on me every day, so much that I'm scared. -*

February 9.

The rain stopped sometime last night, and the city once again welcomes daylight, albeit filtered through a cloudy grey canopy that the rain managed to leave as a parting gift. I was up until late last night canvassing the crime scenes for clues, and I was so tired I decided not to go home and just crash at my old high school friend Gakuto's place, which was nearer. Good thing he was very accommodating. Now, despite my lack of sleep, I can't seem to shake off my custom of waking up early, but stuck with nothing to do, I spend the time looking out the window and looking at the dawn slowly creeping over the rest of the city.

“You up early, ain’t ya? Maybe you’re looking to fix me some morning

“chow?” It’s Gakuto, awake now and rubbing his eyes. Of course, I decline his polite request.

“In your weirdest dreams. Besides, there’s nothing but beer in your fridge. I can’t work miracles, you know.”

“Hah, sharp as ever, Mikiya. Time to bang on my neighbour’s door and see if they have some grub to eat,” he concludes with a yawn. I watch him get up, scratch his head, and look at me for a moment, to which I muster my best look of disappointment. Then, still groggy, he struggles to reach the door, before doing a very slow double take on me, his eyes now as surprised as if he had seen a ghost.

“Ever take note of how pale you are at the moment?” he says to me. “You sure you feeling okay?” Frowning, I take a look at myself at his mirror. He’s right. I’m as deathly pale as a doll.

“Don’t worry. It wears off after a while. Acid only takes about four to six hours. Might be having some hallucinations and random synesthesia until then, though. Should be interesting.”

“Someday, you’re curiosity’s gonna make you end up face down in a gutter somewhere.”

“But it hasn’t.”

“Give it time,” he smiles. “So, you curious enough to try out what’s being passed around on the corners these days,” he observes, looking over at the remnants of my fix last night. Some blotters the size of stamps, and some rolls of weed still remain unused, scattered above his table. I nod.

“The weed you can throw away. The acid...well, I’m done with that, but you can have them if you want. It’s not addictive, if that’s what you wanna ask, and it’s definitely got to be more fun than the poor excuses for amusement parks we have here.” I grab the coat which I hastily hurled on top of the bed last night, and quickly put it on. It’s still 7am, and the city should just be beginning to breathe again. I don’t have time to be leisurely anymore.

“Heading out already? Stay for a while, man. You can’t even stand up correct, let alone walk,” Gakuto says.

“Can’t. Got things to find out,” I answer, surprised at how weak and throaty

my voice comes out.

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

I point to Gakuto’s TV. “Watched the 6am news a bit earlier. Seems last night, behind this love hotel called Pavillion—”

“The one with high prices for them suit-and-tie motherfuckers?” Gakuto asks, interrupting.

“Yeah, that one. Apparently the murderous monster killed some more people in the alley behind it. This time’s different, though. News said four people all at the same scene.”

Gakuto hums, a sound of curiosity, before turning on the television. Predictably, it’s all morning news programs, and will be for a little while longer. The content is unsurprising. The murderous monster again, and the subject is just as I told Gakuto. There is one new point of interest in this report he’s watching, and that’s—

“The suspect is dressed in a kimono? How about that, huh?” Gakuto asks, keeping his eyes glued to the TV. I shake my head, leaving the remark hanging in the air as I continue walking towards the exit to his apartment. Though I’m better off than I was just an hour ago, I’m still a little shaky as I put on my shoes. As I do this, Gakuto walks up behind me, seeing me out. With his hand holding the two drugs I left behind on his table, he starts to ask a question before I leave.

“So what’s it like taking both of these at the same time?”

“Can’t say it’s a glowing review. You only get what Hansel and Gretel felt.” With that, I stand up and open the door, waving my hand behind me before leaving his apartment. I don’t bother to turn around to see if he waves back.

It’s only when I’ve stepped outside into the sun and closed the door behind me that I begin to feel the pang of hunger. I haven’t eaten for a day. And the munchies from the weed is no doubt only making it worse.

It takes me an hour to walk from Gakuto’s place to the crime scene that I saw on the news this morning. Nothing is out of place when I get there. Blue

uniformed policemen are keeping a tight perimeter around the entire place, and aren't allowing anyone to get near. And of course, rubbernecks are there as well, trying to get their fair share of an unusual sight. Between them and the police blocking the entrance to the alley crossroads, I can't catch sight of anything useful inside.

I think about going to the Pavilion love hotel nearby, but then I consider that it would probably be a waste of time. There wouldn't be a receptionist to talk to, and whatever personnel certainly wouldn't even consider talking to me. And like hell they'd show me their security camera footage. And anyway, even if Shiki did make a stop at that hotel, she wouldn't be there now. So I decide to come at this from a different angle.

I came into contact with a particular drug slinger right around this neighbourhood when I was trying to find a friend of Gakuto's back in July, and I was tracing his whereabouts back to his usual slingers. I only ever got a cellphone number, so the phone is the only extent of our interaction, but I talked to the person before and that was enough for me. I find a pay phone nearby and call up the person up, asking for a meet to get some new information. There is a silence on the other end of the line for a few seconds before the person gives his consent. Then I make my way over to the address.

It leads me to a place far from the noise of the city's main avenues, outside of the commercial district. Here, old buildings crowd around each other, poorly zoned and a testament to what the economy had left behind. The apartment building I arrive at is an old, run-down place, the dirt of years that cling stubbornly to it making the color of the place darker than it was originally intended to be. It was obviously long abandoned, the front entrance having been boarded up. The address I have says to go to the second floor, however, so I look around for a fire escape. Soon enough, I find one, though it is missing a few steps and the rust has long overtaken it. I climb it, each footfall sounding on steel, and careful to watch each for a sign of dangerous collapse. When I get to the second floor landing, I find the door leading to the apartment's common hallway unlocked. I step inside, quickly finding the room I'm looking for, and knock.

Beyond the door I hear the sounds of footsteps, and the movement of shadows

under the little stab of light emanating from under the door. This lasts for a few seconds before the wooden door finally opens slightly, and a person sticks her head out. It is the face of a woman, her long brunette hair sweeping down from behind her head. At first glance, she looks to be only a few years older than me. She looks me up and down, slipping me a visible smile before opening the door the entire way. She is dressed unremarkably, with only her red winter coat as a characteristic feature.

“Hey. I’m the one who called you this morning—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Hope nobody followed you. Wouldn’t want anybody to know someone’s living in here. Get in here, quick.” Suddenly, she reaches out and takes my arm, pulling me into her room forcibly. I spend a moment trying not to stumble, and find myself inside a very messy room. Clothes and magazines and other assorted things have claimed possession of the floor, and in the middle of all of it is a kotatsu. The woman walks past me, quickly sitting down and slipping her legs inside the kotatsu. She gives me an impatient glare, motioning her head for me to come near her. And so, a bit more timidly than I’m used to, I sit down on the floor across from her. The kotatsu isn’t warm at all, however, and I notice that it isn’t connected to an outlet. Probably because there isn’t even any electricity in here.

“So this is what you look like, huh?” she says in a high voice. She rests her hands on the table, and her head on her hands, tilted sideways so that she has to look up at me awkwardly. “Didn’t really expect you to look the way you are.”

I want to answer that it’s entirely the same with me, but I hold off on it. She’s acting a lot different than the two curt conversations we’ve had on the phone have led me to believe. I don’t know how she slings her product, but—

“Oh, it’s easy. Nobody really gives a hoot if you’re a guy or a girl, as long as you got the product.”

“Err, yeah, I suppose,” I manage to stutter out. “How did you—”

She chuckles. “You’re an easy book to read, and it’s written all over your face, you know? Still, though, I could swear from your voice on the phone that I had you pegged as some kind of reptilian look-type guy. Complete with widdle spectacles, ‘information is power’-type college boy. Well, guess it doesn’t matter

in the end. So, what was it you wanted to ask?"

She blinks, then narrows her eyes. In that instant, though she did not move at all, I could feel something change in how she carried herself, almost like a switch has been turned on in her mind. Trying to ignore the feeling, I press on with my first question. I clear my throat.

"I guess I'll start with what happened last night. Heard anything to the effect of witnesses to what went down with the murderous monster last night?"

"You mean the wild girl in the kimono with a leather jacket?" she says. The sentence catches me so off guard that I'm forced to avert my eyes from her. If she's as sharp as she claims, she'd have probably noticed that too. She continues, "Don't need to ask anyone else about that. I mean, I saw it after all. Let's see now...I think it was around 3am last night? The rain didn't seem to want to stop. This place is scary in rainy nights, and business has kinda sucked lately, you know? But that love hotel is a constant customer. They buy from me all the time. I was going out to make my delivery, and I passed by the entrance to the alley, and then I saw them. Four youngins, trying to mug a broad in a kimono. Shameless, I tell ya."

There is a playful thoughtfulness to her eyes now as she recounts last night's events, and before long I find my eyes meeting hers again. "The news says the suspect's gender is unconfirmed. How do you even know she's a girl?"

"Trust me, I'd know. Ain't no better judge for a girl's body than another girl, is there? That said, it was pretty dark," she furrows her brow, as if trying hard to remember, then, "Wait, do you know this girl?" She raises her head now, and looks at me straight. I bite my lip. No answer. "Fine. Nothing to do with me, I guess. I was hoping this would be an info trade and not just me giving and you taking, you know? My advice, though? You should probably drop her like a bad disease. She's not normal. I've been friends with dangerous people my entire career, and I know how crazy it can get. I'm friends with more than a few junkies, but they're pretty safe as long as you're not a dick. What I'm really afraid of is people like her."

"She was something else. Four youngins got her surrounded, but she was at them easy-like. She had a knife, right? And then she was just dancing around

them like a ballerina, swinging at them, but never enough to seriously hurt them. But it wasn't to avoid killing them, that's for sure. It felt more like she *wanted* to stab them over and over again. Like she was... enjoying herself. The dope fiends eventually got tired, or maybe the pain was getting harder to ignore, so they started to run. It didn't matter. The girl was faster. She jumped on them, killing three with a stab on the back. Why she waited until then to finish them off, I wouldn't know.

It went especially bad for the fourth guy she cornered. Guy had his face to the ground, crying and pleading for his life, but the woman didn't waste any time, and planted the knife straight to his neck. Then she just stood there for a long time, doing nothing except standing in the middle of all the carnage. I saw her eyes then, glowing for some reason in the middle of all that dark. A deep blue light. Like nothing else I've seen, I swear. I wanted to scream, but it wouldn't come out. A good thing, looking back on it. She would've chased me down and stuck me like she did those four guys if she'd heard me."

She says all of this with no gesture or gesticulation, just her eyes looking up at mine, affixed there as she tells her story. It tells me that she isn't lying at all.

"Something bothers me about that, though," I finally say after a full five-second delay. "You say you were hiding at the corner of the alley and the sidewalk, where you could only see silhouettes. How could you even know that the cuts weren't that deep? Or the state of the bodies?"

She grins. "You're right. I don't have solid proof I can show, and I can't tell you I was near close enough to tell you about how bad the cuts on the guys were. It's just the gut feeling I got, and some healthy assumption. Which is why I didn't take this to the cops. But if you want to find some other witness, then you're welcome to try."

"So it's safe to say that you probably couldn't truly tell what gender the suspect was."

She concedes me a tired shrug. "Whatever you say, chief. Again, I just know from looking. I could tell what she was wearing well enough though. It's a kimono, like the news says, but it had a jacket worn over it. Couldn't see the sleeves, see? In fact, without the sleeves, the kimono looks more like a skirt that

way. Funny how that is, huh?”

“Yeah,” I mutter absentmindedly, “really funny.” Something is off about all this. All of it seems like the facts are too controlled. The manner of death coming to light first, making the city remember the entire affair that ended three years ago. Then the frequency of the murderous monster’s actions increasing exactly after this was exposed, paralyzing the city. Then showing his general appearance. All orderly, engineered. Almost like—

“Almost like a game, yeah?” The woman says with a tired wave of her head. I look at her, eyebrow raised, and she shoots me back a catty smile as she rests her head back on the kotatsu. “We done here? Cause there’s not a lot more I can tell you about last night, you know.”

I can’t muster a reply. I feel like there’s more to ask. I keep repeating in my head how she was in the dark, unable to see very well in the heavy rain. I keep thinking that she’s wrong that she saw a kimono. Inside, I keep saying to myself that it isn’t Shiki. But laying out the facts before me makes me expect the worst. It’s just like three years ago, then. I need to keep believing. I haven’t even seen anything with my own eyes yet.

“Yeah, I guess that’s enough about what happened last night.” I say, as much to her as to myself. “I still have some questions, though. This might be a weird question but, this was the first time there was a witness for the crime, wasn’t it? I mean, especially since there’s been a new body every day for the past week, and they weren’t exactly happening in deserted places. Unlike three years ago, the murders today all took place downtown, and it’s kind of weird that there hasn’t been anyone that’s stumbled on the crime as it was happening before now, or seen anyone strange wandering around.”

“Mmm, I guess so, now that you mention it. But if you’re asking if anyone I know has seen it just like me, then I’d have to guess no. Most of the bodies were dropped at places that we don’t really cover. Besides, as a rule, it’s not like slingers and junkies like to talk to cops anyway. And if you’re going to talk about strange personalities walking around, well, have you taken a good look at us? We walk around town and *we’re* considered strange. And people who wear kimonos tend not to go near us, if you catch my drift. I mean, who even wears kimonos these days? Wealthy old maids or something, am I right? Kind of

strange to catch someone like that buying drugs from us, yeah?” She repeats the word “strange” in a whisper, as if muttering some kind of code to the table.

“Still, that makes you the first one to see the whole thing being done. The murder I mean. Don’t you find that the least bit odd?”

She scratches her head, getting visibly annoyed. “What about it? No witnesses means no witnesses, and that’s that.”

“But with no one to see it, it’s like a sealed room mystery, and that removes all meaning from it.”

“Wait, whoa, what? Sorry, I’m kinda slow, mister college boy, so you’re gonna have to cut me some slack. If it’s a sealed room murder, then isn’t that a good thing? Police never find the body and you never get caught.”

“Then it’s not the kind of murder our suspect wants. As far as the people outside the room know, no crime has been committed inside the room. And in fact, a sealed room killer wants this, so as to bother people as little as possible. It’s the entire point of it. When there’s no way to get inside the room, the murder begins to look like suicide. When people think of murder, the suspect’s going about the whole sealed room thing the wrong way. The thought of a suspect should be the last thing on your mind. But this murderous monster wanted to be found. Hence the locations he chose. Open, well-trod, in the busy portions of the city; far from being a sealed room. And yet, no convenient witnesses to him.”

The woman hums an affirmative and nods her side-lain head. “But you do have a witness. Me.”

“I know. But if this murderous monster wanted to show off, then a witness would have long ago surfaced.” My theory, however rough, is all I have to go on. If I follow where it goes, then the next matter is simple. The fact that a witness was present last night means it was different. Maybe it was unplanned, not truly a part of the great architecture of his work.

“I think I’m getting it,” says the girl probingly. “So you’re thinking that the lack of witnesses on the other murderers had a reason. And that because I’m a witness now means he could have screwed up somewhere.” She crosses her arms lazily and furrows her brow, as if she’s just now parsing what I said. “You’re pretty smart, college boy, though you could stand to get better glasses. So where

are your thoughts stringing you along now?"

"I...don't know just yet," I mutter hesitantly. Annoyed, I look up to think. What else is there to think about? My hypothesis and...that's that. Suddenly, the girl, who still kept staring at me with narrowed eyes, broke out into laughter.

"Ah, silent type now, yeah? You guys do have your reasons, I suppose. So what's yours, I wonder? Out to prove the innocence of this girl, hmm?" "There's a lot of stuff to be proven first before that. Like this new cocktail package getting popular. Anything you can tell me about that?"

"Ah, it all comes back to this, eventually." She gives me a sidelong glance, her eyes somehow bolder now more than sly, and it seems to me that even the air of the room changes with it. "I'm assuming it's the acid and weed combo you're talking about. Normally, that combo is called a 'mudra,' but that's not the same as the cocktail going around now. Not even close. That shit is fierce, buddy. One dip and you're gone, same as the rest of them. Start taking it every day, and it'll kill you in no time flat. I don't know what kind of kick people get out of that."

"Is that so? I've tried LSD and marijuana before, but all I got was nausea and the munchies, then it just went down to the kind of level you'd expect."

"Going around town and don't know the first thing about drugs, do you?" She does a little *tut tut* before continuing. "Totally not a good idea. All right, let's school you college kid. Thing about drugs is your body can have a resistance to it. If it's weak stuff, you might end up taking more and more of it every time, and emptying your wallet in the process. Not the way to go, right? Then there's dependency. There's physical and mental sides to it, but to be simple, it's how hard it is for you to deal with when you don't get your regular juice. The stronger it is, the more frequent you start to take it. Ah well, it all starts with the person anyway. Easier for someone hopped up on acid to stop than it is for a smoker, oftentimes. Ask me, alcohol, smokes, and coffee are larger problems. Why drugs are illegal and those aren't is what I wanna ask."

I have to say, her little rant at the end makes me chuckle a little bit. Luckily, enough, she doesn't notice. Not that I think she's wrong or anything. She's probably right. But I like how she just suddenly flew into it out of nowhere. It takes her a moment to calm down before she continues.

“Well, fine, I guess it’s true there can be drugs that are designed to make you so physically dependent, it can do some real damage to your body. On principle, I don’t sell that stuff. That’s why I’m not so good with the guys selling the Bloodchip. Don’t know any, and I don’t wanna meet any.” “Bloodchip?” I say. She nods.

“Street name of the new cocktail. It’s a special one, that. Two blotters, mixed in with ten grams of weed will cost you only this much!” she says in an exaggeratedly excited tone. Then she raises a finger, a single finger. A thousand yen. Now, other countries have always priced their narcotics higher than we do in Japan, but this is ridiculous. Even a middle school kid would have very little trouble coming up with the money to buy regularly. “Damn. That’s like fast food prices now.”

“Yeah, and getting lower, too. They get people addicted, and then they lower the price. What the hell is up with that? I mean, that’s just bad business sense, isn’t it? That’s some dirty undercutting that even the yakuza don’t do. And it’s even worse than the stuff out there on the street. It might be some really pure LSD , I don’t know. All I know is, it’s getting more popular every day. What’s weird is that you take it orally, right? But then it’s more effective than shooting yourself up with dope. Never tried it, though.”

“Is this a well-known fact?”

“Of course. It’s how the trade goes. Surprised to hear you don’t know it, actually, seeing as you’re apparently in the market. Though the connect for the Bloodchip only uses children to sling his stuff, so I guess that limits how the knowledge gets passed around. Street level guys know about it, but the lieutenants don’t give a damn. All of them think it’s just some stupid children’s game, probably. Guessing that’s also why the cops don’t have an angle on it just yet. They keep targeting the big name yakuza groups, but never the independent merchants like me. We’re just too high class for them.” She laughs again, a cheerfully mocking noise.

I on the other hand, only have what she told me to darken the mind. The dealer I got my drugs from never told me about this new one. I tried the wrong thing then. Judging from what she said, that might have been a good thing.

“Thanks, miss. You’ve been a big help, really.” I thank her and move to get up. Time for me to get back on the move again.

“Don’t get in over your head now, yeah? The connect for the Bloodchip is a really magnetic guy, or so I hear. At least the junkies seem to think so. I told you before that business has sucked lately, right? It’s ‘cause I’m the only one left in this neighborhood that’s still not slinging the Bloodchip. It’s not my thing, you know? But to the new converts to the cause, the entire thing almost looks like some New Age cult by now,” she says with ill humour. She elects to stay inside the kotatsu, and in this cold, even without the electric heater, I can’t blame her.

I navigate around the scattered trash and magazines in her room, and grasp the knob on the front door. I ask my last, almost forgotten question, without bothering to turn around.

“Oh yeah. Do you happen to know the name of the connect for the Bloodchip?”

“Oh, you don’t know?”

She says the name. The answer was completely not what I was hoping for. For a moment, it makes me dizzy. Could this be what ties everything together? I struggle to regain my composure, hoping she didn’t spot my momentary surprise. Those sinister eyes I looked into before must know by now, though she keeps her silence. I say my thanks again as calmly as I can, and head out the door and out of the abandoned apartment, back into the gray-black world of the cloud covered city.

## / 2

- June. -

- *My life now has never been closer to perfect. -*
- *To find out that having a conversation with somebody, without fear or restraint, has been very liberating. -*
- *Perhaps it would be at recess, or lunch, or even after school.*
- *I would wait for him with a clinging anticipation. -*
- *And the times when we talk are times when my heart beats so fast, it begins to hurt. -*
- *But it is pain that can be ignored, so long as we can talk, and let it never end. Though it always must. -*
- *Ah, I see it now. -*
- *My world has been cloven in two. -*
- *And the boundary between these two worlds relies on that singular truth, the man named Mikiya Kokutō. -*

When I finally wake up, the sun had long since set in the west.

I pull myself up, and make my way to the edge of the roof I had just slept on,

and jump nimbly to the neighboring roof of a long abandoned low-rise. The roof that had so kindly served as a bed to me was only authorized personnel allowed, you see. That pretty much made it the closest thing I had to a perfect place to sleep in without being bothered. So I got to the roof of the abandoned low-rise next to it, and it was an easy jump from there to the next roof and freedom of sleep. More than a week now since I started this ridiculous life.

Unlike the other building, which had decidedly less external vertical access, this building had a ladder from roof to sidewalk level. Looking down before I use it to make sure the coast is clear, I quickly descend the ladder and find myself back in a familiar alley. A silence engulfs the city at this hour, as it begins to get truly dark. Something dangerous is out. I can feel it in my bones. I keep myself at the ready.

Only scattered trash and paper decorate the lonely alley I stand in. Conveniently, one of these is a discarded newspaper, dated February 9, today. As for the front page headline, it comes as little surprise. The murderous monster again.

“Murderous monster kills four people. A kimono-clad figure...spotted in crime scenes?” I read out to myself. Huh. That’s an eyebrow raiser. Four people? Do they mean the four guys from last night? And this paper’s saying they’re dead. Kimono...do they mean me? It really did get hairy last night, and the whole affair was over really fast. But I couldn’t have killed them. I couldn’t.

God, I don’t even know anymore. All I know now is I need to find him. This murderous monster whose identity I don’t even have a fucking clue on. Like three years ago, I find myself drawn to the places where this killer has done his work, to think on them and see if I can find something in myself. I throw the newspaper away, maybe a bit more strongly than I’d intended.

“I don’t know anymore,” I repeat, whispering it to myself. The wind howls, and for a moment, it scatters the trash about. With people out for me, now, more than ever, I need to move so that no one sees me. Now, more than ever, the backalleys will be my passage. Now, more than ever, I need to hide myself in the dark, dirty places. Now, more than ever, I need to cast aside humanity, at least for a while. And even then it may be painful, painstaking, yet ultimately fruitless work. That I still don’t stop what I’m doing even though I know this, might be

the clearest proof of my idiocy.

Every day there are no easy or fulfilling meals, no rest for my muscles, and no satisfaction to my sleep. I don't have anywhere else left to go, but it still feels like I'm running from something, deep in the vast darkness of the city.

I think to myself, what the hell have you started here, Shiki? Holding my breath, hunting someone? After I've found the murderer, what then? Kill him? Is that what I'm really after? Mikiya...he wouldn't like that. Just remembering him makes me feel more like I'm falling into a trap that I can't pull myself out of.

I shake my head, trying to dispel all the troubling thoughts. It doesn't work, but at least I remember to walk now. Once more into the breach tonight, I suppose. I need to end this fast. End it, and maybe I can go home...

At two in the morning, the entire city sleeps the sleep of the dead. Not a single human shadow in the roads, and the noise of cars are infrequent and always at some place far away, a few streets over. And always, the police siren clung to them, like the neighing of distant horses. Businesses are closed, and houses have their lights off, and dark clouds cover the moonlight and the accompanying twinkling of the stars, preventing any respite from the gloom. You'd think that with nobody out, that nothing would happen, that all would be well. Ah, but there's the rub. For there are people out, only hidden in the forgotten places of the city, in the thieves' highways and in the gutters and in the shadow of looming overpasses and buildings. With any luck, they huddle together for warmth and comfort. But the ones who ply the night alone aren't so lucky.

I walk the main street, which looks so strange and alien tonight having been deserted.

**A fair distance away, I see a person, the streetlight behind him granting me only a silhouette to work with.**

I stop. Something seems off about him. There is a droop in his stance that hides something about him. Something about all this feels so...nostalgic.

**The shadow sees me, and slips inside a nearby alley. My feet spring to life without my will, following the shadow.**

A chill rises in my throat, but I ignore it, and enter the alleyway.

Inside the alley, it's like an entirely different world. The alley is a cul-de-sac, with the buildings forming walls all around it. Because of this, no sunlight shone upon it even on bright afternoons. Honestly, it looked more like a room than an alley, another place forgotten by the city. In this dead space, there was once one homeless person who dreamed his dreams of happiness and delusion, but not today. The walls of this alley just got a brand new paint job. There is a wet, sticky quality to the ground, and the usual smell of rotten food is commingled with an even stronger scent.

All around me is a sea of blood. Bodily fluids seep and flow through the alley, and the sweet, sticky smell pierces my nostrils. In the center of it all is the corpse. Whatever face he donned in death can't be seen anymore. His arms were severed, and the legs became stumps around the knee area, pressurized blood pouring out of them. Where the other ends of his arms and legs are, I cannot locate. The stumps themselves don't even look like they've been cut. It isn't the work of some fine blade, but more like the violent feeding of an animal. From someplace, I hear—or do I imagine it?—the sound of a hungry stomach being satisfied, and the noise of chewing, barely even an echo. It is the sound of tough meat being chewed on.

A world so different, even the bold crimson of blood was being overwhelmed by the raw smell of beastly warmth.

And behind the body, the shadows seem to part to admit another man. A man whose contours and curves snake around him with. He wears a similarly blood red jacket, and held loosely in his lazily hanging right hand is a knife, around seven inches long. The hair that almost reaches his shoulders is cut without a care, but long enough that you would wonder at the man's gender. At a distance, he would have probably passed as a girl. Only one thing differentiates me and him: his hair, a golden and noble blonde. The putrid air that washes over and sways that distinctive feature of hair lends him a carnivorous aura. A leonine character that presses deep down into the soul.

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This was all much too familiar to Shiki.

All of this was much too close to a long, dearly departed memory, now come again to repeat itself like a curse.

It was a memory of summer's end, four years ago. A dead night much like tonight closed upon the town, and on that night, Shiki saw a shadow, followed it...and the next thing she knew, she stood, still as anything, before a blood-soaked corpse. What happened in between was not her own recollection, but of the other, **Shiki**.

"Who the hell are you?" said Shiki, talking to the individual before her that seemed like it stepped out of some image in her own mind. Shiki saw this "other" her, this blonde Shiki, move its shoulders. A quiver, a tremble. Not out of fear, she imagined, but out of a perverse pleasure.

"Shiki...Ryōgi," the shadow said. Shiki wondered if that was a reply, or a beckoning to her. The voice that said it was so plain that it could not be read. With a flutter of golden hair, the shadow turned to her. And she saw now that even the face bore the twisted resemblance, like looking intensely into a queerly discolored mirror. The blonde Shiki had red eyes, no less penetrating than Shiki's own, and the ears glinted with silver earrings. Though not a kimono, Shiki saw that the shadow wore a black skirt, reaching down to just above the ankle; a match for the deep, blood-red leather jacket.

But the shadow was no woman. Just a man, given the title of a murderous monster.

"It's you. You're—" whispered Shiki, but before she could finish, the murderer had already started to make a beeline right for her. Knife in hand, he moved low like a sprinter, with no other choice in this narrow alley but to try and break past Shiki.

Shiki quickly drew her own blade with a practiced dexterity, but the scowl on her face then still told of her surprise. The shadow drew close, but with no human quality to its movement. He brought himself like a coiled snake, striking. And for a snake, even this narrow alleyway was more than enough to serve as a hunting ground. And even to Shiki's trained eyes, the man moved much too fast for Shiki to reliably track.

And as soon as the distance between them was nearing a close, his pattern of movement *changed*. With a potent force, his legs folded and he jumped, all of it happening so fast that it seemed like an explosion of strength. And suddenly he was in the air, knife held pointed, then thrust with frightening accuracy at Shiki's head.

A tiny glint in the darkness, and a moment later, the keening sound of steel upon steel. Another instant with a grating noise, as the murderer's blade makes contact with Shiki's own cross-guard. And in that instant, as both knives embraced each other like brothers, both combatant's glances fell to each other's eyes. Shiki, with narrowed eyes of hostility, and the murderer's, with widened eyes replete with joy, and then the moment was quickly over.

With a visible grin, the murderer disengaged himself, turning Shiki's blade aside, and leapt to the side, behind Shiki and toward the other side of the alley, successfully going around her. Like a spider, he landed, having leapt six meters with one jump. And then he stopped, stood there, breathing with a beastly noise.

And already, with his hunched form, and impossible movement, Shiki could clearly see that he had long been far removed from any common notion of humanity.

"Why?" he spoke. "Why won't you take it seriously?" Fresh blood from the corpse graced his fingertips and the hem of his skirt, still dripping as he spoke. Shiki felt little need to answer him, but still looks at this man that looks so much like her. "You're not the same. Not the same woman four years ago. If you were the same, you would've killed me, but you keep toeing that boundary. I've wanted you for so long. You, so much like me. But why?"

He spoke with a voice so guttural that it almost seemed like his very heart would come bursting forth from his mouth, and his breathing was loud and rasping. As if the very act of conversing was enough of a strain on his reasoning, and that his breathing would prove the death of him. *Is it pleasure, Shiki thought, some kind of arousal, or was he truly in pain?* Shiki decided that it didn't truly matter.

"I'd have never expected it to be you," Shiki said, a hard, cold edge to her voice. "A woman's name, and a body that could really be mistaken for a woman.

We only talked once back at school, didn't we?"

The murderous monster shook his head in an unsteady rhythm. "Yes. So long ago. I've forgotten so much." He snickered, barely suppressing his laugh. He was enjoying this, somehow.

Shiki could find no joy to draw from here. She had sought this murderer out to finish all of this, and that was all. "How many have you killed?" she asks, her voice slight and almost hesitant.

The murderer giggled now. "Would you believe me if I said I've already lost count? I try not to think on them. Just numbers. Just numbers, all of them. And no one can point them back at me, can they? I'm free of the cycle of crime and punishment. And so I kill, sometimes for days at a time, as you've obviously known." He coughs violently, and seems to heave forward, but finds himself again before continuing.

"I've left so many things, so many traces all for you. All the murders. How I left the corpses. I knew you'd think they were familiar. What happened four years ago. Yes," he draws the word out in a long, low breath. "I thought that would jump start your memory. But you ignored me. Ignored all of it! It didn't make the right...impression." He flashes a smile, displaying a row of bloodied teeth that shine in the night. "They call me a monster. What I lacked in a name, people readily gave me. It's spot on, no? This week was very good for me, too. I did exactly what they expected me to after giving me such a title. After all, people need me to commit murder, so that they can demonize him like any other monster they know. Right? But you know all this, don't you, Ryōgi? You admired my work. You came looking for me. It's the seed in you wanting to be free, to find a predator just like you. Just like me. Yeah, I understand. I understand. Because I know you best."

His labored breathing became higher and louder, echoing in the silence of night embracing the alleyway. Shiki saw him lick off the stray spots of blood still clinging to the corners of his mouth, his tongue savouring each drip. It did nothing about the blood still scattered on his face. What was he doing to that corpse that would cover him in blood from head to toe? His eyes were bloodshot like a madman's. And in front of such a grisly sight, Shiki could muster no reply. The hate that welled up in her forbade any words, as though gracing the man's

presence with even a single word would dirty it irredeemably.

Even if—or perhaps especially because—his words were hard to deny. Her desires, and her murderous impulse, coming together.

Shiki turned away from him then, hiding her face and her furrowed brow. But the murderer didn't miss a beat, as if he could himself sense the pump of blood, the telltale sign of minute perspiration that became the formula of trepidation. The man smiles, his mouth twisting into a crooked shape.

"Oh, that won't do. You keep holding back. You know what you're doing. There's something inside you, shouting out what you really are, but you deny it every day. But there was never any need to. Just submit. Do what it wants. It's what *you* want, too."

Shiki keeps silent, still looking at the man as one would look at poison. The murderer voices his last proposition.

"You're a persistent bitch, I know. So I know that if you can't return to what you once were, then I guess I just have to kill the cause of all this. Kill the one making you hold back. After which, everything would be solved. Go on. Tell me I can't do it. You were so close to solving the problem yourself three years ago. *So close.* Now I just have to finish it myself." The murderer threw his head back, eyes shut and laughing deeply.

"Tell me—," Shiki said menacingly. Her Eyes glow unlike before, blue and rich with the power of magic. She rushed toward the man, her movement so fast, and the man so distracted by his own revelry, that he never saw her. "—who's going to kill who, now?"

Shiki slashed effortlessly; her blade, empowered by entropy itself, passing through the man's arm and laying waste. His knife bounced lazily on the ground, forgotten, and his distinctive laugh turned into a scream of mad keening on the edge of hearing. He leapt away from Shiki, trying to find safety in distance. But Shiki was fast, and gave pursuit. He needed to find someplace that Shiki couldn't reach.

So he jumped high, higher than what seemed possible, letting his remaining hand cling to a stray windowsill in one of the surrounding buildings. Unbelievably, he pushed himself up, leaping higher and higher, clinging to pipe

fixtures and parts of the wall chipped away where his hands and feet could find purchase, moving with the ease of a flying squirrel. And at last when he had climbed about twenty meters up, clung to the side of the building with the sureness of a spider, he finally dares to look back down on the alley where he had just so narrowly escaped from.

And down below, shining clear in the field of darkness, are the Arcane Eyes, an intense azure glow, unflinching and affixed as if they were the eyes of Death itself.

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The murderer had made his way away from that fateful alley, even though his blood thirst hounded him terribly inside. It did not matter. Another sensation hounded him more now. A virgin taste of genuine fear. And after it, strangely, jubilation that he could scarcely control.

“I knew it. You’re still real,” he whispers under his breath as he skirts from rooftop to neighboring rooftop with a practiced effortlessness. “She was real.”

Tonight, he knew, he had found the incontrovertible proof. That girl still prowled among the side of the world where the damned lived, the secret world of monsters and murderers that lay under everything. He would expose that side of her, bring it out like no one else truly could. He knew how. He needed only mention the notion of killing a certain someone to bring Shiki perilously close to that boundary. And if she had the sense to cross it, the man knew she would be a better monster than he had ever been.

“It’s so simple. I just have to kill the one holding her leash.” He leapt down in a gap too wide to jump, but grabbed hold of a low-hanging wire fixture, and used it to maintain his momentum and swing himself across to the next wall, climbing it easily. Losing only seconds to climbing, he was easily back on the roof. Down below, Shiki tried to give chase, he knew. He could feel her, feel the drive of the hunt. But it was a hunt she had lost minutes ago. Swiftness was key, and running across these buildings was what made him swiftest of all. Though the low skyline of the neighborhood had no trees to swing from, it might as well have

been a dense forest for the likes of him. He could hide himself, track his prey, all in convenience. It was an art.

He felt alive more than ever now, even as the stump of his arm bled and left an obvious trail. Already, the blood had begun to clot, and the wounds began to close. Soon it would just be a mere stump. Near useless, but it didn't matter. He offered a single, rejoicing, and defiant howl at the moonless night. A cry of love unfulfilled for four years, now finally reaching its fruition.

## The Second Homicide Inquiry - III

- *July.* -
- “*I don’t like weak people.*” *That’s what she said to me, very calmly.*
- “*I don’t like weak people.*” *Just like that, Shiki Ryōgi threw me out like trash.*
- 
- “*I don’t like weak people.*” *I don’t truly know what she meant by that.* -
- *But that night, for the first time in my life, I hit someone.* -
- *That night, for the first time in my life, I murdered someone.* -

February 10.

*It’s definitely a cloudy day, but some of you are gonna have some welcome sunshine today.*

I hear the weather report drone on in the car radio. It only takes one look out the car window for it to be clear that wherever that welcome sunshine is, it’s surely not shining anywhere near here. Not a lick of change from yesterday.

With a hand on the steering wheel, I look at my wristwatch, seeing that the time is barely past noon. If this were any normal day, I’d be at Miss Tōko’s office, calling some random person for an art exhibition, or taking care of expenses. But this was no normal day. I called her up this morning, saying I’d be taking a sick leave for the day, as I did yesterday. And now I find myself in my

car, trundling slowly down the bay side harbour and industrial areas.

“Take it easy, Kokutō,” was all the warning Miss Tōko said to me. I wonder if she somehow knew what I was doing. In any case, the warning isn’t enough to stop me. Especially after last night, when another victim of the murderous monster had been uncovered. And of all places, too... the crime scene last night was the alleyway where the first murder was found over four years ago. Only a fool would think that was a mere coincidence. With every day comes a new murder, and every day, the connections grow stronger, building towards something that the killer wants said to somebody. That means there’s little time left.

After my little stint at the home of that dealer girl yesterday, I spent the rest of the day trying to find out where the Bloodchip package was coming from. As it turns out, the trail to the drug connect led here, to the harbor district, where the connect apparently lives. It’s where I’m headed to now, address in hand, to finally confront this man who might hold at least some of the answers.

The deeper into the harbour district I get, the more the traffic starts to become dominated by 18-wheeler semis carrying various shipping containers and sea cans in different colors, all going out to destinations somewhere in the city, until finally, they are virtually the only traffic on the road, a trend broken only twice by a port authority car rolling up. Finally, I reach the main road that opens into the harbor itself, and from here, I can see the bay quite clearly. Ashen waters reflect an equally ashen gray sky as waves crash determinedly at the high waterfront. Only a few ships are in today: clearly not a busy day for the port, which typically handles 90,000 container tonnage a year, but today many of the gantry cranes stand inactive. Little islands dot the interior of the bay, some of them no larger than two football fields. A dull arc in the distance crosses the great expanse of the bay, the only bridge across it. Another bridge called the Broad Bridge was slated to be built, and was close to completion at summer last year. But it was...destroyed by a typhoon, and when inquiries were made into construction safety, all work was halted. There haven’t been any rumblings about it being rebuilt, so now its gutted and twisted ruin stands there as a monument to failed industry.

As it happens, the address I’m looking for is quite near the Broad Bridge, and

offers a clear view of the level of destruction it sustained. This part of the harbor is a quiet one, away from the usual bustle of the stevedores and the typical traffic. I choose a parking space on the roadside and get out, immediately noting the smell of saltwater in the air as I do so. The neighborhood is unremarkable, filled with small businesses catering to low-cost housing in the area. The proximity of the place to the noisy harbor marks it as a low land value area, yet today none of that noise can be heard. If not for the crashing of the waves and the returning undertow, the place would have been soundless. The address itself is little more than a wooden prefab two-floor apartment-for-rent that looks so run-down it feels like it was run through just as bad as the nearby Broad Bridge. And yet, according to the rumors, the connect to all of the Bloodchip packages in the city apparently owns it. Running it through city records seems to turn up a name of “Alaya” for the owner, but I highly doubt that’s even true.

The building only has six studio-size rooms on its first floor, and I knock and try every lock on the doors, making sure no one else is in the building. With a little nervousness creeping up on me, I try as quietly as I can to climb the wooden stairs leading to the second floor, though the rickety thirty year old stairs clearly show their age. I find the room I’m looking for, only to discover the door is locked. No real problem. I produce a screwdriver from my jacket pocket and set to work trying to pry the doorknob out by force.

This is definitely something crazy I’m doing, especially for me. But it isn’t really the time to be bothered by decency. With the dealer out, this is my only shot at this. At last, after a few minutes of frantic pulling, the doorknob bends and comes lose. “Bingo,” I whisper with satisfaction, and pass through the door to steal into the room.

Immediately after the entrance, I find myself in the kitchen. I expected to find some cooking utensils here, but none are present as far as I can see. For the most part, it even seems unused. The layout of the studio apartment itself is quite narrow, and would probably never accommodate any more than two or three people, and that would be pushing it. Another doorway leading out of the kitchen goes into another small room, though a bit more spacious than this one. From what I can see from the kitchen, I find it not so dissimilar to the room of the slinger I visited yesterday, though things seem far more cluttered and littered

about, if that could be believed. Whatever force passed through the room, a typhoon or whatever, it seems content to leave everything where they were discarded carelessly. In the far wall of the next room, a curtainless window is placed, offering a clear panorama of the leaden sea. The distinct sound of crashing waves that I heard from outside is eerily muffled now, small and far away from hearing. The window seems like the only concession to decoration within it that I can see. Without anywhere else to go but inside the cluttered room, I make my way in.

As soon as I step into the room, and take a cursory glance around, I feel the blood rushing to the back of my head in shock, and a sensation of collapsing. Resisting my body's inclination to just fall down, I collect myself and pass a lingering survey of the room.

I came here to find something. I expected there to be drugs, some kind of process on how they're designed maybe, if I was lucky. Just some clue that would lead me to the next step. I never expected this.

“Shiki,” I breathe out, though no one is here to listen. What I had seen from the kitchen as trash scattered all over the walls and floor are, in fact, photographs. I take one in my hands. This one is a photo of Shiki in her high school days. In some corners of the room are canvasses, filled with amateur portraits and sketches of Shiki. Hanging by wires in the ceiling are more photos, and there are a bunch of albums in a small shelf. Too many pictures, too many to count. All of the same person. Shiki Ryōgi.

The pictures are all of various times, but none seem to go back farther than four years ago, to 1995. But many of them are extremely, frighteningly recent. There is a photo of Shiki in the uniform of Reien Girl’s Academy, when she had to infiltrate the school for a case this January. No daily necessities, no food, or entertainment, or personal touches decorate this small room beside the sea. And yet, nothing could be more personal as this room. This is him, the man and his world entire, sprung forth from emptiness to fill void.

A cold sweat races down my back. This room’s owner could be back at any moment. Should I leave? Or stay and talk to the man? Could there still be any reasoning with him? I shake my head, dispelling the thought. Any man can be reasoned, I tell myself. And this man and I have much talk and explaining to do.

We haven't seen each other since school.

It is then, when taking stock of myself, when I spot the single book lying atop the desk beside the window. It is notable, because it sits on that desk as a solitary object, when all other things in the room are scattered haphazardly and without clear regard to order. This book holds an importance. The green spine, the binding, and the cover are immaculately clean, as if it were meant to be presentable to people other than its owner, as if it begged to be read. It rests there, shone on by the single beam of light pouring into the room from the window, the soul of this personal world.

I take it in my hand. And, perhaps playing into the desires of its owner, I open it to the first page.

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I don't know how many hours have passed. But I have spent them standing in this room, reading this book, a diary of the room's occupant, until the very last page. It is a chronicle of murder, a history of violence and its genesis. It goes back a long way, well into four years ago, with the ritual murders. Where it all began.

I let out a long breath, as if I had just run for miles, and look up at the ceiling. The diary began at spring, four years ago. The very first line, from the very first page, was where it could all be traced back to. It clings to my mind, and will for a long time, as the point when a person's mind comes to change. His story is no different from any story, beginning simply with two lines:

"April 1995. I met her," says a voice coming from the entrance to the apartment, sudden and clear. Slow and uneven footsteps make their way across the hardwood floor, and when he reaches the entrance to the room, I finally see him, with the same intimate smile on his face.

"Hey. Long time no see," he says. "It's been, what, three years, Kokutō?" There is not even the slightest hint of astonishment in his voice. The man wears a black woman's skirt, and a red leather jacket. From the messily cut hair that

barely reaches her shoulders, to his ambiguous features, he has clearly strived to look as much like Shiki as he can. His hair is, however, a vivid blonde to Shiki's rich black, and his eyes bear contacts that color them a deep red. "This is a bit earlier than I expected you to find me. Thought it'd be a bit later, actually." He avoids looking at me, and instead looks at the floor as he speaks.

"I thought so too," I agreed, holding down the lump in my throat. "Right? Maybe I screwed up somewhere? I thought I'd removed all trace of myself after we last talked back in that old restaurant."

"No mistake on your part, I think. But there *was* one clue. Remember the apartment complex in Kayamihama that got torn down back in November? I had the opportunity to follow the paper trail for that building before that happened. Your name was on the list of tenants. After the business with that apartment complex, it worried me, since that was no normal building. Somehow, I felt then that you had to have some kind of connection to Shiki. Am I right, Leo Shirazumi?"

Shirazumi runs a hand through his blonde hair, combing it upward, before nodding. "The list of tenants, huh? You always were good at searching for people, Kokutō. It was another one of Alaya's little tricks of the Art. It didn't hold my interest for very long. And yet, thanks to it, I met the one person I never wanted to meet again here, earlier than I'd planned." He smiles awkwardly, and steps further into the room.

When he steps into the light, it's only then that I notice his left hand cut clean from just above the elbow, with nothing left below except a dull, dried stump. "But it sounds like there's nothing to hide from you. Yeah, it was three years ago, wasn't it? When you first saw Shiki with a body. It was no coincidence that you found me on your way to the Ryōgi estate. I delayed you, because I wanted you to see exactly when she murdered someone. Alaya had already considered me a failure then, just a thing to be cast off. But I still think I made the right choice. It seemed like a disservice to a friend not to show you Shiki's true nature. What she's really like."

He sits atop the desk beside the window, speaking in a tender tone of nostalgia. As he is right now, he seems little different from the Shirazumi I knew back then in high school. So what is this then? I've read his diary, known he was the

connect to the Bloodchip, and thought he had changed so utterly and completely. But now, he seems...normal. Composed, even. Just like the Shirazumi of three years ago, still smiling and good. But written in the diary in my hands is his claim of responsibility to the murders. All it took for him was one bad day, an one individual called Alaya—already gone by now—to change him into what he is. So his sins must, like any other person's, be answered for.

“The ritual murders from four years ago have started again. And now I find out that you’re the one doing them,” I find the words come hard to my mouth, though I keep my gaze at him straight. Shirazumi himself cannot bring himself to do the same, it seems.

“Yes,” he nods. “But I wasn’t the serial killer back then. Lay the blame on Shiki Ryōgi. I only wanted to protect you from her.”

“You’re not a good liar, Shirazumi.” I say it more confidently now. From my coat pocket, I retrieve a single blotter of the Bloodchip, letting it fall to the ground. They flutter in the air before falling, joining the many pictures already scattered on the floor. A pained glance is all Leo Shirazumi can spare for them. “When you quit school to do something you wanted to do, was all of this what you meant?”

Shirazumi shakes his head. “Maybe I’ve strayed. Too much, you could say. Maybe I was a fool to think that I could even survive in this trade. I’ve made a drug that frees people from this prison. But as to how it all could have come to this, I honestly don’t know.” His smile is tinged with melancholy, and he shivers as he speaks. He grasps his cut arm with his good one, letting it wrap around his body, as if to gather what warmth he can. As if sensing where I was looking, he talks of his arm.

“This? Shiki Ryōgi again, if you haven’t already guessed. I expected it to start healing in short order, but so far that hasn’t happened. I suppose it’s the nature of her spell of death. A wound will heal, but this arm is now truly ‘dead.’ Alaya *did* say to me that life in its true and pure form was the domain of sorcery beyond him.”

Sorcery. I never expected to hear the word from him. But I suppose I should have, having read the diary. He was rescued by Sōren Alaya, much like I was

myself. All of this smelled of the stink of a far reaching, calculated plot. Could it be so, even though the man himself was already dead?

“Shirazumi, why all these murders? What’s the point?” At hearing my question, Leo Shirazumi closes his eyes in recollection.

“I don’t kill on a whim, you know,” he whispers with a pained tone. He puts an open hand in his chest, clutching it as firmly as though he were in pain. “I haven’t killed because I wanted it.”

“Then why?”

“Kokutō, do you know a thing about what they call the ‘origin?’ Your master is a mage herself, isn’t she? Tōko Aozaki? You must have heard of it at some point. It’s a soul’s true nature, the grand beginning. What one should be. The origin of my soul was awakened by Sōren Alaya, that demon that masqueraded as a plain human.

I don’t think Miss Tōko ever told me about this origin, or the awakening of the soul. It’s all gibberish to me. “I don’t really get it, but you’re saying that’s what’s making you kill?”

“Don’t think I know a lot about the origin of the soul. I only know what Alaya told me; that because I was awakened, there was no going back. That it was like instinct in you, that we all had in some form. Sometimes, you get special ones, like mine. And unfortunately, Alaya happened to find a use in it.” He breathes a deep sigh. Beads of sweat begin to collect in his forehead despite the cold.

Something is changing here. There is a dangerous tinge to Shirazumi now. I spy a quick glance toward the door, noting how far I am, and how near he is to it.

“Are you alright, Shirazumi? There’s something wrong—”

“Don’t worry about it, alright? This always happens.” He exhales another long thread of air before continuing. “Listen, Kokutō. This instinct that I have...it destroys sense. It’s stronger than my will. It’s my enemy. Twenty years...of being me...isn’t enough to hold it back. It’s just like Alaya said. Anyone with his origin awakened is tied to it. I know...you don’t understand, Kokutō. But my soul’s origin is ‘consumption.’” His halting voice stops to admit a violent cough, and his breathing has become rough and throaty without my noticing it, as if he

were holding back vomit. The hand that presses tightly upon his chest clutches it desperately. He shivers now, more violently than even a minute before, and his teeth begin to chatter in anticipation.

“Shirazumi, what’s happen—”

“Let me talk. This could be the last sensible conversation I can hold. Now...the origin. It changes the body in...subtle ways. Inside. The power of the Art is inside you, making you capable of things that the body can’t usually do. It’s more than ancestral memory. It’s returning to...some primal state. And it’s so subtle, the affected person...doesn’t usually notice the change.” He brings his hand to his face, covering it and turning away from me, trying to stifle laughter. His shoulders shake, whether from laughter, or from his sickness, I can’t truly be sure. “So that’s what this is. Before I knew it, I became...what I am now. The origin is an overriding impulse. When it’s awakened...I...stop being...I. Because of my origin...I have to consume.” He pauses, his voice still trying to halt some inner change. “Fuck! Don’t you understand, Mikiya?! Why the fuck does it have to be me, huh?! Why the fuck does my origin need to be this way? I’m going to die because of something I barely even understand. It can’t end like this! I want to die, still being me.”

Like in the throes of some great illness, his teeth chatter incessantly. He gets up from the desk. I manage to glimpse his face, and his eyes, tears welled up in them. His shoulder’s don’t stop shaking as he desperately fights himself.

“Shirazumi, listen. I have a friend. Tōko Aozaki. Let’s take you to her. Maybe she can do something to help you.”

Shirazumi’s knees fall to the tatami covered floor, his face looking downward.

“No. I’m special. Different.” He raises his head and looks at me. His convulsions are getting worse by the second. But his face holds a kind of surrendering tranquility that I didn’t expect to see. “You were always good. That’s right. You were always on my side. Maybe it’s because of you that I can hold myself back right now. I don’t...I don’t want to have to kill you.” He crawls the distance toward me, clinging to my legs with his one arm. The strength in that arm is unbelievably strong, and my legs almost give way from the pressure. But strangely enough, I don’t feel so afraid. The greater the strength in his hands,

the better I know how desperate he is, how much he wants to get away. And I can't find it in myself to refuse that.

“Shirazumi,” I can do nothing except stand here, and utter his name, in hopes that he can remember. His hand climbs to my coat as he continues to kneel, and now I can feel his shivering, so violent that it feels like he’s getting torn apart at the seams. And suddenly, he whispers in a low, far voice.

“I’m a murderer,” he says, in narrow penitence.

“Yeah,” I reply, gazing out at sea through the window.

“I’m not like you,” he says, in retched contrition.

“Don’t say that,” I reply, gazing out at sea through the window.

“I can’t be saved,” he says, in choked confession.

“You’re still alive, which means that’s another lie,” I reply. There is little I can do but to gaze out at sea through the window.

Words uttered on the verge of tears, and vague answers. What salvation is there in that? But at last, Shirazumi manages to force out the words that perhaps he hated to say himself. In a thin, threaded voice, he pleads. “Then save me, Kokutō.”

I can muster no reply. I curse my own powerlessness, how I can do so little to help him. There is a beat of silence between us.

Then he groans, a low rumble, long held, like a monstrous noise that comes from deep inside him. The hand he clasps my coat with gathers strength in it for one surprising moment, and he uses it to pull himself up. In one swift motion, he strikes my chest, and then a moment of disorientation, and a sharp pain in my back. When I pick myself back up, I find that he had flung me toward the wall. I look back at him. He looks back at me with maddened, bloodshot eyes.

“Don’t follow. Don’t look for me. Next time, I *will* kill you,” he says, his voice calmer than it had been since he came into the room. He climbs on the desk in one swift motion, then smashes the glass window with one strike of his hand.

“Shirazumi! We can still go to Tōko Aozaki. I’m sure she can—”

“Sure she can what, Kokutō?” he spits out, malice clear in his tone. “Make me

better? You can't even guarantee that. And if I get better, what's waiting for me? Nothing but a death sentence. And Shiki Ryōgi herself hunts me. I walk a path, and I know how it ends either way. But I still have to run."

He snickers for a brief moment before quickly jumping out the window. The last thing I see of him is his blonde hair, floating in the seaborne breeze. I hurry toward the window, casting my eyes downwards. But no trace can be found of him in the harbor.

"Idiot," I whisper, not knowing whether I directed it at Shirazumi or myself. This isn't over then. Not by a long shot. He thinks there's no way out, and I can't really promise him there is. I bite my lip as I leave the room, this temple to Shiki, thinking about how helplessly caught up I am in this whole thing. No easy solution seems to be forthcoming, but there are things left to do still. I need to find Shiki, and I can't let Shirazumi go, even if saving him seems impossible. I can't allow him to murder more people. For his sake.

## The Second Homicide Inquiry - IV

- *August.* -
- *I haven't had a wink of sleep since that night.* -
- *I can't even go outside. I'm so scared someone will see me.* -
- *I look at myself in the mirror. Spoiled. Comfortable. And I hate myself for it.* -
- *I'm the worst kind of person.* -
- *Nothing seems to be worth it. I'm not even eating.* -
- *Though no one has shot me, or stabbed me, or pushed me off a height, I am still a crumbling existence, living through the everyday like a man already dead.*
- 
- *And after the seventh day, I realized myself that the man I murdered didn't die alone that night.* -
- *Because the reality is a very simple truth.* -
- *That to murder someone means you murder yourself too.* -

By the time I'd left the harbor and went back to my apartment, it was already well past sunset, and dark had settled on the city. When I go inside the room I had not been in for a straight two days, I turn on the light, seeing no one inside. On the table is a map of the city, spread out in full. Beside it is a mug filled with barely drunk coffee. Both of them untouched in these past days. Only solitary air

rules this place, and Shiki isn't here tonight to dispel it.

I sigh; involuntarily, I notice. I had dared to hope. After all, since January, Shiki had often come here without telling me, doing nothing else except talking and then sleeping, then leaving at morning the next day. An eccentricity she had repeated quite often. And I had tried to put a slim hope on such a thing happening when I got home, for her to be lying on my bed, as if the past few days had never happened.

I remember going to Shiki's old household servant, Akitaka, a few days ago. I was looking for any advice I could get. When I told him about how Shiki could often be so unpredictable, he silently placed a hand on my shoulder and said "I must leave the lady to you now." It stymies me until now, and I couldn't help but think at the time that it must have been some kind of circuitous and poorly worded compliment. Hard to believe that just a week or so ago, the days just came and went with me barely noticing. I'd always thought they'd be that way forever after what happened in November. Now every hour of every day passes slowly and trudgingly.

I snap out of my reverie when the phone rings. Probably Miss Tōko, come to add more burdens to the soul. I can't really blame her. I mean, I have been absent for three days. So, with growing apprehension at the kind of chewing out I might get, I pick the phone up.

"Hello? Kokutō speaking." In the other end of the line, I hear only a sudden gasp. And for some reason, it is a familiar sound, a sound of a girl I know. I take a wild guess.

"Shiki?"

There are two seconds of silence, and then...

"*You idiot,*" she finally says with a tense voice, pouring all of her sneer in that last word. "Where the fuck have you been walking around? Maybe you haven't heard, but there's a serial killer loose. Haven't you been watching the news la—" then she suddenly cuts herself off. Of course I've been watching the news. And of course, she knows what the news has been saying. A girl wearing a kimono. It's exactly why I couldn't have just sat on my ass and do nothing.

"Fine, whatever," she continues with a sigh. "You're okay. That's all that

matters. Just stay at Tōko's place until this whole mess clears over. S'all I wanted to say."

I am glad, at least, that she still knows how to worry. Because at least, from what I gather from her, we've been worrying together for the past few days. And yet it still causes some disquiet. If she knows she's not the killer, why hasn't she come home?

"Shiki, where are you now?"

"None of your fucking business."

"It is my business. You're trying to find the serial killer, aren't you?" There is a long silence, when I can hear only her light spun breathing. And then, a single word.

"Yeah." She says it with cold, murderous finality, so much that I think I must have shivered. And so what I'd feared is true.

"Don't do it. Shiki, just come back home. You can't kill him."

"You've met with Shirazumi then, Mikiya. Then I gotta ask, are you out of your mind? What do you expect me to do? He's given me every reason to kill him." Coldness turns to a low, short laugh on the other end of the phone.

"Shiki! Just list—"

"No, you listen. I've got my prey. And he's not going to get a chance to get away. He's the perfect brand of crazy that I haven't had the pleasure of hunting for a while now."

*Perfect brand of crazy*, she said. I remember Fujino Asagami, the killer this summer that committed murder out of pleasure. Now it is Leo Shirazumi, a murderer that kills against his own will. And she thinks them the same, because it's the same murderous impulse that drives both of them; that drives her. The impulse of murderous monsters.

"And who the hell are you to judge who deserves to die? How many sins does it take?" I find myself saying it louder than I'd intended.

"Ah, finally the dulcet tones of your generalizations. And what kind of judge are you for people who deserve to live, huh? Does Leo Shirazumi, a serial killer

who's killed far too many people, deserve to live? He's as fine a candidate as any for death, I'd say."

"Don't be a fool here, Shiki," I say urgently. She has to remember her words. "No one deserves to be murdered, and you know it. You don't hold the scales here."

"What I know is that he's beyond help. No longer human." She declares plainly.

Say she's right. Maybe Leo Shirazumi can't truly be called human anymore. But at his last sane moment, he said he wanted to be saved. "There may still be something we can do for him if we hurry. Just come back for now and we can talk, Shiki. Kill Shirazumi, and there's no going back."

Silence, save for our frozen breaths. And long enough after the sentence hangs in the air, she utters her words. "I'm sorry. I need to."

"But *why*?"

After a moment's hesitation, she answers, her voice dry and tired. "Because we're the same. Both murderous monsters."

An admission so frank, so direct. I put a hand on my temple and close my eyes. "No, you aren't! I mean, you can't even pin a single murder to your name."

"Luck. That's all that is. It doesn't change a thing. I've come to realize something, Mikiya. That four years ago, I was this close to murder. Because **Shiki** was someone who knew nothing but murder. But that's it. **Shiki** knew murder, but that wasn't to say that he liked it. And it only takes a moment to realize what comes next. That ever since I woke up from my coma, ever since **Shiki** died, something's still digging inside me, shouting murder, even without him. It's simple, really. Now I know that the one that truly wanted murder wasn't **Shiki**, who died, but *Shiki*, who survived." The voice on the other side lowers, cursing herself. Though it is little changed from her usual tone, it's the slight difference that becomes painfully noticeable. "That's why there's nothing left for me on your side of the world. And that's why you shouldn't wait for me to come back."

Her voice cracks with a little chuckle, more a scoff. Is she crying?

“You’re making another mistake, Shiki.” She doesn’t answer. I continue, unfazed. “You said to me some time ago that a lifetime only has room for one real murder. Those were your words. You believed in that. And you, more than anyone, know the price of murder.” After all, she had been suppressing—murdering, in her words—the **Shiki** personality ever since she had been a child. She knew the pain of **Shiki**, the victim, and of *Shiki*, the murderer. It’s why I believed in her, in the girl who always seemed to hide some invisible wound. “I know you won’t kill. You’re saying that you haven’t murdered anyone because you keep getting lucky? Don’t make me laugh! You’re the one that told me we make our own luck. You’ve always kept that impulse tucked away. Every person leans some way or the other. It’s just that you lean on the act of murder. But you’ve been able to hold it in, and that means you can keep doing it. I’m sure of it.”

“What are you so sure of? How can you even begin to understand something even I don’t understand?!” she shouts, something so rare for her. But the answer is something I’ve long known.

“I know...there’s good in you.” I know, because she couldn’t kill me three years ago. Shiki offers no answer, and it causes me to wonder where she is, what she looks like now, after seven days. What expression she wears as I uttered my words toward her, in that other world beyond the phone line. But all of it ends with words of parting.

“You never change, Kokutō. I told you, right? *Shiki* always hated that part about you.” And after that, the phone cuts off. All I can hear now, is a repetitive digital noise, indicating that she had hung up. Her last words were the same ones that she said as she stood under the rain last year, at the end of summer.

The clock in my room shows February 12, 7pm. With my dislike of leaving a job I started unfinished feeling like the only thing driving me forward, I soon enough forgot that I had not slept for two days, and leave my apartment.

## / 3

- August. -
- Every day, my brain continues to give ground to insanity. -

*I know...there's good in you.*

I remember, and it lends my feet to stop. When I find that the only sentiment the words dredge up from me is a strong irritation, it only makes me more annoyed.

“Optimism must be in his blood,” I conclude, grinding my teeth as I imagine what kind of stupid face he must have had as he was saying that. I try to make the image vanish.

He really hasn’t changed in four years, that guy. Still clinging to a misplaced belief in a murderer, still trying to smile at me as if all of it were nothing. Giving me a taste of normalcy, a promise of some attainable dream, all of it a foolish fantasy. A fantasy of someone abnormal like me living and having her place under the sun. *Shiki* always used to hate that, and now I understand why.

The past always comes back to square with you. I tried to kill him once before, and I don’t know if I can stop myself from doing that again. So that’s why I need to be far from him now, so I don’t question myself, and so I can be far from whatever pain his presence just engenders. But all it results in is me being the old me again, someone who thinks of Mikiya as an unwelcome hindrance. I can’t say

for certain if that's what I truly believe in.

Two hours after my chat with Mikiya, I finally get to where Leo Shirazumi likely made his final retreat. I'd tracked the place down well before I called Mikiya up. It was fairly simple to follow Shirazumi's trail. Blood, the smell of weed, and some questions to a few street level dealers who I left only a little intimidated and worse for wear all soon pointed me in the right direction. Now, I'm back here again, eager to settle the score once and for all.

The harbor is dead at night, the steel cargo containers stacked together forming impromptu structures that make the entire place feel like it's a town that was raised overnight. Somewhere in here is the last redoubt of that murderous monster. Eventually I reach the part of the harbor that's quartered for storage and warehousing, and at that point, it is already well past 9pm. Few people live here in this part of town, and even fewer have any reason or desire to go here. The only lonely company here is the blackened sea, and high lamps shining little pools of light on the streets and walkways below. Perfect, then. This means there's very little chance of anything or anyone getting in the way.

At last, I reach my objective: a fairly sizable warehouse near the Broad Bridge. I grip my knife in my left hand, and my right is hidden inside my jacket pocket, fingers holding a smaller throwing knife. Checking myself, I walk toward the building. It looks big enough to rival a school gymnasium. The walls go up to about eight meters, and has windows going round it at regular intervals around the seven meter mark, and I suspect some larger windows in the roof as well. Much like a greenhouse, it must be terribly bright in there during daytime.

From afar, I thought that I'd have to try for the windows somehow to gain entry, but as I neared the place, I realized I don't have to. The steel door of the front entrance itself is slightly ajar, the handle long overtaken by rust. Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised if it was a trap. I briefly consider trying to go around, but I remember Mikiya. *Kill Shirazumi, and there's no going back.* I wonder what he meant by that.

Fuck it. The faster I can kill Shirazumi, the faster I can get these doubts out of my head. If going in the front means it draws Shirazumi out faster, then so be it. I open the door wider, and take a step inside, exiting the dreariness of the port, to enter something far stranger.

Skylights are indeed placed on the roof, which along with the side windows, prove to be the only place where moonlight manages to seep through. The light reveals exactly what this warehouse's purpose is. A few meters from the entrance, thick foliage is planted in the open soil. The plant's reach close to knee height, all of them the exact same breed. Cutting straight through the middle of it all is a concrete path. This is it. This is the garden he uses.

A rustling in the brush catches my attention, over where no patch of light shines to reveal his position. I'm not alone here. He's watching me, determining what his next move will be. I suddenly realize how vulnerable I am in here. Why the hell did I even step into such an obvious ambush where he has the advantage? Mikiya, and his stupid words. Is he throwing me off my game that much?

At that moment, the thick foliage rustles loudly, and I see some shape in the darkness parting the plants as it runs, close enough to me now that it startles me. He closes the last few meters with vigorous steps, emerging from the shadows leaping with knife held high to make a vicious overhead slice. Smart move, but he revealed himself a moment too soon. My left hand moves, meeting his blade with a parry from my own. The blow is warded, but it was so strong that my arm falters for just a moment.

Any experienced in-fighter would spot that and press his advantage to hammer home, but Shirazumi is clearly not so experienced. He uses that momentary lapse of my guard to make good his escape, jumping high and away from me. Just like last night, he makes an inhumanly high and long leap toward the wall.

Of course, not being a bird or a spider, I clearly can't follow him like that. But I've come prepared for that move. As soon as he jumps, I quickly take an educated prediction at where he'll land. And before he even lands, the throwing knife hidden inside my pocket is sent flying by my right hand to intercept its target. A second and a half later, and I see it scored a hit, enough to elicit a painful grunt from him as he falls to the floor. I was already sprinting as fast as I can toward him as soon as I threw the knife, and when he fell, I banked on the fall and the knife hurting him enough to be disoriented and confused. The gamble worked, and it gives me the extra few seconds I need to rush up to him and pin him down to the ground by straddling him.

Now he looks up at me, his face a mixture of confusion, anger, and surprise. Surprise at how quickly I adapted from last night's little indecisive dance, maybe? Whatever the case, I savor the look on his face, and how he's lost for words. This boy who looks so much like me is silent as my left hand raises the knife. A boy. That's just what he is. A little boy, so powerless, so scared.

"W...wait a minute," he pleads. But prey do not get the privilege of begging for a reprieve. I stab my knife downwards...much as I had wielded a similar one, but against a different boy, in some other rain-soaked night.

"What?" says a voice, choking on its own surprise. It is the prey's voice, as well as my own, both startled at what just happened. The knife closed to his throat, and I stopped it right before it pierced flesh and gave him the red smile. I put my strength in my left hand. No escape will avail both of us now. The boy cannot escape my blade...and I cannot escape wearing the boy's skin, becoming the murderer. And in so doing, I will be alone again, with nothing to call a home, nothing to hurt or pain me, living freely; a daughter of chaos.

Yet, why does my left hand not move? Why can't I kill Leo Shirazumi? There's no going back. The words echo in my mind.

The prey has more than enough time to exploit that moment. He pushes me away, trying to slip away from my grasp. He rises, trying to escape, but in so doing, he reveals his back to me, defenseless. He wouldn't know. My Eyes and their Art weave the lines of death into sight, and I see them tracing out and around his body. All that is left is to swing the knife.

*There's no going back.* And just like that, my last chance slipped from my grasp. And it was me who let it slip, willingly. What a farce. A great farce. I had the chance for the sweet taste of murder I had craved after for so long, but I couldn't cross that last empty boundary. All because of such simple words.

"Fuck!" I shout reflexively. I never asked for a way back into his world. I never asked for this world's forgiveness. But why? "This is all...because of him," I whisper under my breath, each sound a pained and angered breath.

Now the prey I had let slip begins to laugh. The prey who had only seconds ago feared the predator in front of him has seen his enemy for what she really is. Broken. And now he returns to the skin he donned last night, the mask of the

murderous monster. And I cannot kill him, cannot stop him, cannot even bring myself to run.

- *August.* -

- *Alaya was right.* -

- *I am perfect.* -

- *None can blame me for murder. It is as inevitable as the rising of the sun.*  
*The gift of delirium.* -

The rain is pouring.

I open my eyes to the pitter-patter of the rain on the roof; a low, muffled rumble.

“Huh. Still alive,” I observe, my voice dulled. The next thing I feel is the concrete underneath my back, before I realize that I’m lying down, which makes it feel awkward for a moment. I raise my head a bit, my vision still swimming, to look at what’s in front of me. Green. The weed, all over the warehouse. And suddenly I remember where I am.

I look up at the windows on the roof. Sunlight streams through them, but dulled and colorless from the heavy rain. Still, the light that does get through is surprisingly intense, so much so that much of the place seems to be lighted quite well, albeit with a tint of dismal purgatory that helps little with the gloom of the

garden. And so here I lie.

My last memory takes a while to resurface, but I suppose Leo Shirazumi knocked me out. My hands are bound by steel handcuffs, and my entire body feels slackened and weak. Due to some drug, I'd imagine. Even my consciousness doesn't seem to be a sure thing right now. My mind is empty. All I know is that I'm here, cuffed and lying on a concrete floor, fighting between dreaming and waking, and barely able to see or focus on anything except the silhouettes of the lazy trailing of fallen winter raindrops on the roof skylight. I only notice then how cold it is in here.

It's the damn drug he shot in my body. I close my eyes for a moment, and my mind almost immediately reels back to a memory that has been weighing so heavily on me recently. A memory from three years ago, from what feels like a distant and completely separate life.

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The rain was pouring.

The night was so cold that it felt like it could shatter bones as easily as frozen ice. Unsheltered from the rain, *Shiki* gave chase to Mikiya Kokutō. She ran, relying on the faint shimmer of streetlight piercing through the veil of pouring rain to guide her way. The wet asphalt reflected the ethereal light, even as shadows danced upon its surface. *Shiki* ran desperately. That man in the black coat had spirited Mikiya away earlier, but now he saw him just ahead, standing alone, no help forthcoming.

When she had caught up to him, she brandished her knife again. The boy could not find his words, nor could he run, for *Shiki* had earlier slashed at his leg. The blood from that slash still flowed, leaking down onto the asphalt and mixing with the rain. Yet now, as she had Mikiya in her grasp, when one slash could spell his death, she hesitated.

“Why?” *Shiki* whispered to herself. “Why!?” she repeated, shouting it in a rage. She could feel the bile rising in her throat. They faced each other then, both

wearing a strained expression. “When I’m with you, it’s always so hard. You show me what I can never have, but my madness grows each day. So...I have to kill you. So that this illusion you’ve given me can just fade! So that I can stop believing in lies! *So I can go back to what I was again!*” She cried out, her voice clear even in the din of the rainfall. It was a child’s voice that shouted then, confused and close to tears at what had been thrust upon her, angry and full of self-loathing. And even in the endless gray veil of the rain, Mikiya could see the tears trailing from *Shiki*’s eyes. He struggles to find the words for a reply.

Inside *Shiki*, a presence—her friend and tormentor, *Shiki*—whispered silent thoughts into her mind. **All people dream, Shiki. How heartless can you be to stop yourself from doing it? How much more pain can you endure?** And after those words, she could feel the familiar sensation of letting herself slip, of the other consciousness sliding into the part of her mind that governed.

And in the end, *Shiki*’s murderous impulse was halted neither by herself nor Mikiya. Because it was **Shiki**, always asleep, always the dreamer, that didn’t want to destroy the dream of an existence with Mikiya. Because no matter how impossibly distant it may be, or how painful its idea, it was as important a reason to live as anything. So, it would stay, because its extinguishing would only hurt *Shiki* more. But *Shiki* was confused, unable to taken any more. It would be up to **Shiki**, then.

The girl, controlled now by something else, took a slight step back, still facing Mikiya. Another small step, closer out into the main road behind her. Headlights rushed headlong from a distance, the beam of light dulled somewhat by the rain. That is when she decided, when the car was close enough to hear the roar of its engine. Mikiya never realized the simplicity of the answer.

“If I can’t make you go away...I have to make myself go away,” she said like a prayer. She offered a smile in those last moments: a gentle, earnest, and happy smile, but fleeting and soon to fade. And in the next moments, the headlights grew blinding and bathed her in light. She welcomed it. The sound of brakes shrieked through the midnight air, but it was far too late. She flew.

I had forgotten the memory for so long, but as that mage Kurogiri said, it always lurks inside of you. It doesn't fade away or wither.

I was supposed to die that night, and the one who would wake from the coma would have been **Shiki**. But in those last moments, he took my consciousness, and he became the sacrifice. It was the only way he knew to protect his dream. He knew what would happen. He knew that if he was left in this body, that he would have nothing holding him back from the murder that was the focal point of his existence. And he entrusted me to make that dream real. After all, he could do nothing but sleep in his brief existence. I was the one who ruled my body, and as long as I kept that control, he would always be asleep. He was dangerous as a beast, cornered and lashing out if let loose, and always bound by his nature as a murderous monster. Without it, he couldn't *be*.

And yet we harbored a mutual dream; a dream of normal existence. And it wasn't so strange if I think about it. After all, weren't we the same, with the same upbringing, the same experiences? It's not so big a stretch to see why we'd yearn for the same thing. But I was able to maintain the masquerade of normality; **Shiki** couldn't. He was the paradox of my existence: to scorn other people, but to hold the desire to be one of them as well. He'll never get to see his dream of me living content and whole now. His only dream, contradicting his existence, thrust onto me. The dream we had met that March day, the classmate that **Shiki** had grown to like. The one who, I had fervently hoped, would lead me to that seemingly impossible path. **Shiki** knew how it would all end if he had remained inside me, how Mikiya's existence would always threaten how I'd always lived, and how the contradiction would drive me insane, how it would lead to me killing him. Our dream, crushed by my own hands. **Shiki** saw that end, and chose the only way out. Above all things, it was *him* that had to disappear to protect our dream. So for **Shiki**, the dream goes on.

That's why I want Mikiya to always remember **Shiki**. Because now, this life is the dream **Shiki** had always fixed his eyes upon. It's why I speak like him, to remind everyone of the man that was just as close a part to me as my own heart.

The rain doesn't stop, and doesn't look like it will any time soon. My mind is still a dim blur, still snatching at half-remembered memories of dual

personalities, and of emotions long kept. Yet it is a helpful fever dream. When Shiki died, no one lit a candle for him. No one prepared a vigil. Not even me. I think I never truly accepted his death. But now I realize, in this final memory that he left me, it is time to finally let him pass. This is my vigil to my first friend.

I remember his last thoughts, before that car made me tumble and break.

*Thank you. But I'd never think of killing you.*

It wasn't said to me, but to Mikiya, who watched helplessly that night with arms held outstretched toward me. Murder was his only way of understanding, his last method of connecting with another. But **Shiki** couldn't even say his last words to the man who had deserved them.

## The Second Homicide Inquiry - V

- *But killing by itself does not quiet the voices.* -
- *Being all alone only makes them louder and louder.* -
- *I need someone just like me. Someone as broken.* -

February 11, Thursday.

I'd been thinking long and hard on what Shirazumi said to me, and in light of what he revealed about his condition, I've decided to finally talk to Miss Tōko about this. So far I'd tried to keep her out of what was essentially a personal matter, but if what Shirazumi told me was true, then he's somehow being influenced by a spell woven from the Art. As soon as I heard him speak that word, I knew that it would be prudent to consult the only (decent) mage I know. So under a torrential rain that has poured since the early awn hours, I drive over to Miss Tōko's office, ultimately just a stop before I go back to the harbor to see if I can find something more.

It takes longer than I can believe to tell it all to Miss Tōko, about all that I'd found about the drugs, and especially about Leo Shirazumi, and when I finish, she only hums to herself as she lights up yet another cigarette. After waiting long enough for a reply that I thought was forthcoming, I speak. "Something wrong, Miss Tōko?"

She looks at me with a disaffected, morose stare, and then takes off her glasses. “No, nothing wrong at all. Just thinking how best to tell you that there’s really no way to treat your friend. Oh hey, there you go. If it’s been four years since his origin was awakened, then he’s...well, he’s not your friend anymore.” Smoke trails up from the cigarette she set down on the ashtray. She leans her cheek on one hand propped up on her table, and lets her gaze drift upwards, as if she were deep in reverie. “Still, one of the awakened, huh? A dull parting gift, even for Alaya. Weak willed as your friend seems to be, he wouldn’t have stood a chance against the power of that Art. His degeneration was inevitable.”

“Can you explain to me what this ‘origin,’ actually is? Shirazumi said it was like some kind of instinct that overrides your own will, or something like that.”

“Partly right, but not the whole picture,” she says, transferring her cigarette to her left hand so she can gesticulate with her customary right. “If you think living for twenty years is enough for you to assert that you are yourself, and that you are in control of your body, think again. Your will is as malleable as any aspect of reality the Art can manipulate. Character rules your mind, and it is the flesh that expresses that outwardly. New Age solipsism turned out to be truer than anyone thought, I suppose.”

She puts her free hand on her chin, before asking me a strange question. “Do you believe in past lives, Kokutō?”

“I don’t have a say either way, really. I’m not affirming it, but I’m not categorically denying it either.”

“Spoken like a true politician, I swear. Cyclical and repetition. You see it everywhere, from occult lore to scientific theories. Spirits, souls, and life. Outside of all these concepts, there is the origin, reincarnated into something else, eternally. And from that chaos is born a certain order. Certainly, it is said that mages also make use of this manifestation of age-old power, making all of us lean towards some aspect of personality. A purifying cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Follow the origin to hundreds of spiraling lives lived, until you reach the primordial origin of the soul.

“The Collegium teaches us that there is a place and time where existence first came to be. But in eternal paradox, there is no life there. Only the impetus for

creation. An overriding direction, an entropic tendency to chaos that drives all of reality. Such shards of creation obtain a purpose, a task, placing themselves into things part of the Pattern of reality that matches its symbology. An animal perhaps. Or a plant. Sometimes, or eventually, it may be a man, finding his soul. Sometimes, these purposes can feel like an imperative.

“This chaotic impulse is what mages call the origin. Is it instinct? The Greek ‘daemon?’ Ancestral recall? Moments of genius? The voice of God or the devil? Ask five mages, you will get ten different answers. But whatever it is, it is burned into your soul, and it would be folly to turn away from it.” She smiles then, as if what she had just been saying had not been in any way peculiar. Yet I understood her well enough, surprisingly. “For the vast majority of people, though, they are never aware of it. It is just there, close but never near enough to be important. It differs for each person. Shiki, whose origin is emptiness, is compelled quite strongly. But Azaka, whose origin is the taboo, is still quite normal. But to those awakened to it, well—it’s a whole different ball game.”

She looks at me with narrowed, razor eyes. Even I know what she means. “So by being awakened to it, you give in to that impulse completely?” I venture.

“Yes. Little by little. Leo Shirazumi has fought it every step of the way. But in the end he has little choice except to give in to it. ‘Consumption’ is a pretty unique one as far as origins go, though. I can see why Alaya kept his eyes on him. Look, Kokutō. If Leo has an origin of consumption, then predatory lineages must have been his origin’s legacy. When you’re awakened to your origin, the weight of all your previous lives becomes too hard to bear. Leo Shirazumi is more beast than man now. While his humanity as Leo Shirazumi still remains, the beast scratches away at that, until it is finally gone. Fairly interesting development, I’d say,” she says coldly, appending a laugh to her final comment.

While she always wields a grim humor, I can’t ignore her last sentence. “Is all this business with the Art just a game to you people? It’s all that mage’s fault, isn’t it? The one he met. Shirazumi couldn’t have brought this on himself.”

“Really, now?” she remarks, her voice acquiring its signature menace. “The spell to awaken the origin cannot be woven with the mage alone. It is the one to be awakened who first feels the stirrings of his soul begin to call out to him. Then there is the bargain in the form of a spell, predicated on the consent of the

one to be awakened. Which means Leo Shirazumi always had a choice. His transformation into a beast is of his own volition, as are his murders. He *wanted* this. The life he cast away can never return to him, no matter how much he wants. It's too late for him. This is the true face of the man you knew, and more fool you if you think I lie. His last words to you were the death throes of a damned man trying to eke out that last bit of sympathy from you.”

They say that any good instructor has a stern and firm voice. That is the sound of Miss Tōko’s voice now, a tone I have not heard her adopt ever since that incident in November, and she has never spoken or looked more serious. And because of that, I know for a fact that she isn’t kidding. She looks at me with a frown, perhaps expecting me to press the point and being disappointed that I haven’t yet provided her with the verbal ammunition to chew me out. All that’s left is an empty helplessness.

“Is there nothing you can do for him, then?”

“The spell that binds him is the final, great attainment of the mage who used the medium of souls to chase after ascension. It would be a mercy to grant him peace, but there’s little you can do to stop him. It’s a miracle for Leo Shirazumi to even hold out as long as he’s had. Tomorrow, he’ll be different, a beast that abdicated his humanity.”

I want to cry out at the futility of it all. He asked me to save him. Why would he do that if he knew that he couldn’t be saved? Was it the truth, or was it, like Miss Tōko says, just a ploy for something more sinister?

“Oh, man. You’re an easy book to read, Kokutō. Well, I can’t very well stop you on your little quest, but you’re up against a monster. Leaving him to Shiki would be the wise option. She’s hunting him to finally close the book on what happened four years ago, right?”

Settling matters, huh? That’s part of it, for sure, but it’s definitely not the whole story. I couldn’t help thinking in our conversation last night that I heard the same strained voice from her in that night when I almost lost her. When she almost made the choice of murder. What could prompt her to be so inclined towards killing?

“Miss Tōko, why does someone ever kill someone else?” I ask, hoping for a

reply that is not so reproachful. Miss Tōko leans back comfortably in her office chair, and says her answer without an ounce of reflection.

“It’s emotional release. When you kill, that’s an outward expression of how you feel. People can only hold in so much. Whether it’s love or hate, when you’re filled with emotion, it has to get out somehow. It’s how we deal. Those who hate try to forget it, or try to separate themselves from what they dislike. The extremes of hate go towards murder. And because they see it as self-preservation, what moral code they cling to temporarily disappears, becoming unimportant.”

“But there are people that commit murder even without that reason,” I put in.

“That’s massacre, not murder. When one looks both on his past and his human dignity, weighs them, and throws one away; that is murder. That way a man pays the price, and carries the weight of the sin of murder. But a massacre is different. The victim might have been human, but the killer lacks the common dignity of man, and is thus no longer human. The sin does not weigh heavily on such killers.”

I remember the diary, and what was written in it. *To murder someone means you murder yourself too.* “The news always talks about this murderous monster. What do they actually mean when they say that?”

“Exactly what it says on the tin. A monster that no longer cares, carving their place in the world until they fade like a natural disaster. People dragged into its influence are the poor, unlucky souls.”

Miss Tōko’s answer startles me. I can swear I’ve heard Shiki say the same thing once. Yes, right before she disappeared, ten nights before this. We saw the news, and she said to me that you couldn’t really call what the suspect did a murder. How she said that a lifetime only has room for one real murder.

“That’s it...now I remember...” I mutter in a low voice. Yes. Miss Tōko and Shiki are saying the same thing. Shiki told me the words once, and how they were the last words her grandfather left her. Family words that have guided her entire life. But now, she’s about to stray. Me and the murderous monster have been led to the same realization by Shiki, unwitting or no. I don’t presume to know what Shiki feels about me, but something about it pains her, and leads her

to lash out and kill. Something inside her is giving way to feelings that I'd thought she'd long parted with, and now she thinks that killing someone can save her. Her impulse of murder is winning again.

Shirazumi thinks the same way. But he thinks he'll benefit from Shiki's loss of control. Perhaps he thinks, deep inside him, that he would have finally found a friend, the same as him. *Someone just as broken*, the diary had said.

"Sorry to have bothered you like this, ma'am," I say abruptly as I rise from my chair. Miss Tōko frowns, but it's the kind of frown where she seems to already know what exactly I was going to do.

"Oh, we're done are we? It's raining cats and dogs outside, Kokutō. Think it'd be a good idea for you to stay in for a while?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I realized I have to go." I make sure to bow before I walk out the door. Before the door to the office closes behind me, I hear Miss Tōko say, "Be good on yourself out there, Kokutō. And I'll see you tomorrow."

I dream an old, bittersweet memory.

“There will come a time in any man’s life where he will kill.”

“For true?”

“Yes. And there will also come a time when any man can permit himself to die.”

“Permit himself?”

“A life is a life. And death is respected and feared, esteemed as the true end. All life is equal. And yet you cannot claim the one you hold as yours.” “Then what about you, grandfather?”

“I can’t as well. There’s too much blood on these hands. I became death for so many, so I have surrendered the right to my own. Without anyone to pay the price for my death, all that awaits me is the final emptiness, and a solitary oblivion.”

“So there is only enough for one?”

“Yes. A lifetime only has room for one murder. After this, all of it becomes less intoned. The first is always the most important decision. The men who have committed massacres can never turn inward to kill themselves. Because their death would no longer be a human death.”

“Is the sickness hurting you, grandfather?”

“Yes, and I fear this is our parting. Goodbye, *Shiki*. May your own death be

filled with peace.”

“Grandfather? What is happening? Why do you die so lonely? Grandfather—”

The sound of something sticky intrudes on my dream, and I wake up. It is a sound different from the ceaseless patterning of the rain on the roof, which has faded into the spectrum of ignorable background noise. I open my eyes, banishing the dream from my vision. Here, in the single concrete pathway cutting right down the middle of the brush, I lie with hands bound, abandoned.

Little has changed since the last time I drifted back into waking, though the weakness in my body has noticeably dimmed. I notice that, with a bit of effort, I can already move my legs, though my arms are still numb and useless. It is a familiar feeling. I woke up from the coma like this.

This time, however, my imitator and biggest fan stands above me. Leo Shirazumi. With my sight slowly coming back, I see him staring down at me with half a smirk plastered on his face. A mean smile meant for me.

“You’ve awoken faster than I’d expected, my lady death,” he says as he moves to take a knee beside me. In one hand, he holds a filled syringe at the ready. “The drugs have had worse efficacy on you, looks like. I knew I should have used this first.”

He grabs one of my bound arms and forcefully sticks the needle in a vein. The numbness makes me feel no pain. My entire body is slack and unresponsive, like a broken machine. All I can do now is to glower at the man.

“That look in your eyes is perfect,” he says with audible delight. “You should always keep it that way. Relax, all I’ve given you is a muscle relaxant. You need it to stay calm and still for what comes next. I want you to stay quiet.” He sits on the concrete path now, and his eyes run up and down my body, taking all of it in. Our eyes meet, and, disgusted, I turn away from him, choosing to look instead at the rain outside the windows.

“Oh, how long have these three years been? How long since I was this close to you? I wish you could feel how *good* I feel now, with all my waiting finally paying off.” In his voice is an affection that I don’t feel the need to deign with a

response, though I let him play out his soliloquy as he wills. “Alaya made it clear to me what a failure I was. Said I was too ‘unlike’ you, whatever that meant. Can you believe that? How can we be unlike each other? Huh, Ryōgi? When we killers are birds of a feather. You know both you and I don’t belong to their world. Broken people like us should get together, become closer.”

I don’t answer him. My mind is preoccupied with thoughts of someone else, someone surely far away from here. Yet the man persists with his worthless spiel.

“Ever since your accident, I’ve been watching over you. Seeing who has come into your life. The other two who Alaya manipulated to shape you into what you are worried me a bit, but I could not get in the way. Alaya ensured I wouldn’t. He used people, like tools. Isn’t that sick? Isn’t that fucked up? But how could I fight him? I stayed away from you, as he’d commanded. So please, don’t be so mad at me. It wasn’t my fault. But I never forgot you. Your memory was always sweet. And when Alaya was finally destroyed, I knew that like you, I was free from his influence. I knew I was the only one that could do anything for you. Ah, yes, how I’ve waited for the day I could talk to you as I am now.”

He leans in toward me, so close I can smell his breath stinking of smoke and weed, so close that he has to get on his hands and knees and linger above me, his face leering above mine. Then suddenly, he draws back, takes one of my legs, and puts his lips on the shin in a tender kiss. He makes a disgustingly viscous sound, accompanied by a wet sensation. His tongue races roughly from the shin, going slowly upward, trembling as it makes contact with skin.

I keep my silence, letting the only thing that echoes in the dull warehouse be his own furious breathing, going faster with each beat. My body doesn’t do what I tell it to, yet my sensation is as keen as before. I can feel the sweat pouring from my brow, and gathering at my back, and over my chest, as if at the height of summer.

He takes the hem of my kimono in his mouth and tears it away with one swift motion, as a dog would. Leo Shirazumi’s breathes his warm breath to my skin, consumed by his act. His tongue, at the knee now, flows over with saliva as it continues to trace itself upwards. Now he clings to the inner thigh, the glutinous noise still not abating. The spit coils about my skin. And still, as much as I want

to speak, to say anything, to shout, I kill my voice. Finally, he reaches the waist. He seems not to notice or care about the kimono covering me, and his mouth continues to go up, licking the cloth. There is no end to his salivating, and even clothed, I can feel its wetness seeping through.

The handcuffs feel tight and painful now.

The beast's tongue climbs, traces the outline of my breasts, taking each nipple in his mouth for only a moment before continuing to my neck, then to my cheek, and finally to my eye, forming one dull line. Now his face is above me again, his steaming breath hitting my face full on. The stink of him, and the stench that he shared on my body, is almost enough to make me throw up.

"Bastard," I finally say, the only word I spare him. The smile it puts on his face is one of self-satisfaction. Now he descends his head again, this time opening his mouth and biting deeply into my jugular. The teeth dig in, the pain furious and keen, more so than any regular bite. I let slip a sharp intake of breath because of the pain; like a blade slipping slowly into my brain. The sound is the only satisfaction I give him. And as suddenly as he began, it ends with him withdrawing himself from me, leaving the mark of the beast on my neck. I can feel the blood slowly seeping out from my neck, tracing a lazy trail as it dribbles slowly from the open wound.

"No. I can't...eat just yet. You haven't come back yet. You haven't returned to what you were." He whispers this as he stands back up. "I love you so much, that you'll get extra special treatment from me. Consumption is my origin, and when it is unleashed, I need to eat indiscriminately. Preferably people, eh? But the one that stands before you is the Leo Shirazumi that the impulse supposedly conquered. I can't lose to such a simple thing. As long as you're here, I can slip through, yes." As if to prove his point, he stands up and distances himself from me.

"Again, you refused to kill me last night! You haven't committed one proper human murder yet. Alaya was no human, more a conviction given form. But you're more of a monster than I am, yet why is there no murder in your past?!" His breathing has become even more rasping than just a minute before. Angrily, he turns back toward me. "It's a problem that we need to fix. If I don't have someone just like me, I can't have peace. I'll always be like this! It's you...it's

you that I need. I thought you'd be like me, but you betray me! If I can't have you, the impulse will take over me!"

He begins to shout toward the end, and it is hard to distinguish the rage from the desperation. With an unsteady gait, the beast known as Leo Shirazumi walks away from me, retreating a bit deeper into the brush. "Wait for me, alright? I can take care of the one holding your leash back." Then he slinks back further and further into darkness, until finally, I can no longer see him.

Though I know well enough what he means, and though I know what he plans to do, I cannot focus my mind. Is it the drugs? All I can think of is vague recollections, and incoherent scraps of memory that drift in and out of dream. The number of raindrops falling on the window, and what tomorrow might bring. Meaningless things. I need to *focus*. Why did I seek out the murderer in the first place? There were many reasons, but the most important one eludes me.

I was...it was me that wanted to settle it once and for all. The return of the murders, and the shattered memories of what happened four years ago, recently returned to me...and my fear of reclaiming the urge to kill him, just like on that rain-soaked night. All of it is connected.

And in plunging through my addled mind, I remember. If there really were monsters in this world, I want to believe—I *have* to believe—that I'm not one of them. I can feel it, the wetness welling up in my eyes. I want to go back. Back to the fragile life I lived with him this past half year since I awoke. I want to prove to someone that I can be normal. That's why I sought out the murderer. To finish it all.

But I lost sight of it. I took my sleep in the forgotten corners of the city, hunting down the murderer, and through it all, validated the murderer that still lurked inside of me. My persistence in pursuing him made me sloppy, and led me here to be ambushed and trapped. If it had been the old me—the *Shiki* three years ago—then this would never have happened. I've become weak, even allowed Leo Shirazumi, a disgusting mad dog, to violate me.

If there was ever a bigger proof for foolishness, none exist better than myself. Inexcusable and unforgivable. I want to go back to Mikiya, face his stupid smile, and say my complaints in front of him. It isn't my fault. All of this is because of

him. I turned into this because of him. All my weakness stems from him alone. I wouldn't have been like this if it wasn't for him. And now, even living without him seems impossible.

"This is all so stupid." The drugs still take their toll on my consciousness, but less so now. I still feel hot, chokingly so, and I can feel my perspiration getting worse, as if my body is about to melt. No one can see me like this. Which is why I have to go. I can't stay chained here forever. This isn't where I want to be. I have to go back. Back home. To the only place where I ever felt at home.

Strangely enough, the image my mind conjures is not that of the old Ryōgi estate, but the mundane yet familiar apartment where Mikiya Kokutō would always be waiting.

## **The Second Homicide Inquiry - VI**

At last, two hours after I left Miss Tōko's office, I finally reach the warehouse in the docks, not so far from Shirazumi's room that I had paid a visit to before. It only makes sense that this is where he's growing the weed. It can't be too far from his home, so it was only a matter of narrowing it down to a place big enough to hide them, but where no one usually treaded. The long abandoned warehouse once served as storage for the pier, but the company that owned it closed long ago, which made it the perfect candidate to hide, store, and grow the weed around this area.

I approach the structure, not truly minding the late winter rain as it pours above me with the same gusto as it did in the past few nights. The warehouse is an especially large one, a large enough space cleared in its perimeter as if to give it breathing room. The large steel door that serves as its front entrance stands at a height many times my own, and now it seems to be locked tight. Unfortunately, the screwdriver trick I used before would be a laughable effort if I even attempted it here. So I resolve to travel the warehouse's perimeter to see if I can find any alternate ingress.

I make my way to the structure's right flank, but I can find no breach or opening. Windows line the wall, but placed at the height of around five or six meters high; I'm not getting in there without a ladder. The other side, maybe. After all, with the warehouse standing directly at dockside, surely its sea-facing side would have some kind of entrance leading directly from its port to the basement so that arriving ships can load and unload faster.

After a circuit around the perimeter that felt like it went on forever, I finally

reach dockside, and sure enough, there it is. A stair leading directly to the lower seawall adjacent to the warehouse, and with it, a single door leading inside. I try to silence myself as much as possible as I turn the knob ever so slightly. It seems to be unlocked. I open the door slowly, wide enough only to admit me, then I steal inside. The room within seems to be some kind of temporary storage room before pallets are stored topside. It's large, but a bit narrower than I expected. It doesn't take long for me to spot the stairs going up, and the door to the main body of the warehouse.

I try to get closer, until I hear a sharp metallic clang behind me. I hear a grunt of pain, realizing only too late that it is my own. I never get time to feel the pain, or press down a hand behind my head; only time to collapse as darkness overtakes everything.

I wake up to the sensation of a gulp, my mouth grasping for air as I swallow something I don't agree with. Then, pain. A dull pain in my elbow, and then a sharp, sudden one on both my legs. Then, whatever caused the pain withdraws from the back of my knees, and the sensation is reduced to a pulsating agony. I look around, too confused to cry out.

My sight is still recovering, and my head is still aching, but I can see that I am still in the same place as before, probably only a few minutes having passed. It's only now that I notice how cold it is, and how much my body is shivering. I try to stand, but then the pain returns in my left arm. I look at it, and strangely with little surprise, I find my elbow twisted the wrong way. I try to look at my legs, seeing that both of them have been stabbed in the back of the knee by some blade. Blood is seeping out. I can feel it. I cannot run.

I lie back down. I need to collect myself. Strangely enough, after I swallowed the thing that felt like it was shoved in my throat, the pain seems to retreat until it can barely be felt. A drug, for sure, morphine maybe. But there's nothing that fast acting, is there? Unless it was some kind of medicine enhanced by the Art. I take stock of the situation and turn my head around the room, and on the opposite wall from me, I find the shadow of someone lingering. He looks at me, bending with one knee on the rubble and dirt-filled floor of the warehouse, observing me with a curiosity.

"Sorry, pal. I don't really tie men up. I prefer them like this instead," he says,

standing up and making his way to my side of the room. What I see is dulled from darkness and the pain, and the sensation of being warm and cold at the same time might disorient me, but I can distinguish clearly enough who the approaching figure is.

“Shirazumi.”

“You just don’t listen, do you? I told you not to find me. It’s why you keep ending up in these situations. But still, I’m happy, truly. You came looking for me, after all. I know that you’re on my side, yes.” He draws the word out in a long breath. “Letting Ryōgi have you would be such a waste, I realize that now. If only you’d been a real friend to me.”

The voice that utters the words is not his own. They are proud, boastful words, but not the words of Leo Shirazumi. It seems all an act, and I can’t hear it as anything else.

“You can’t just make people like you.” The moment a word comes out of my mouth, the low pain from my head returns, and every word only worsens it, making it boil from inside. Still, I persist. “Your drugs didn’t work like you wanted to.”

The room seems to darken as Shirazumi frowns, clicking his tongue as he looks at me. “You’re talking too much again, Kokutō. But you’re right. I gave the fools and the phonies the drugs that they needed to play out their miserable lives. They took to it like flies to a corpse. And I, who sold them their happiness, was their new unseen champion. But that was never anything other than a secondary concern.” He shrugs, his every word an evasion. If he can’t say it himself, then it’ll have to be me.

“What you sold wasn’t just drugs. It was more than that, wasn’t it?”

He sighs, and stares daggers directly toward me. “Yes. I wanted someone just like me. But only Ryōgi can be like that. So I thought that maybe I should just make them, right? The weed in this warehouse was courtesy of Alaya. It’s a bit different than what’s out there, eh? You can thank his Art for that. It dissolves slowly inside your body, the effect lasting for a long-ass time. Your body can’t hope to resist it. You get high from it, it’ll eat away at your mind after only a few dozen uses.”

“And to those who pass, you make them take the Bloodchip?”

“That’s something a little extra for those who have the potential. They’re a unique kind, dipped straight into my blood. Alaya said that the awakened are bound to their origin. I thought that my blood, with Alaya’s magic coursing through it, would be different. I got a result I was more than happy with. For many, the Bloodchip is just like any drug. Some die because they couldn’t handle it. But if anyone could truly handle it, they would have been just like me. But then, the corpses of those who died had to be taken care of. So I ate the bodies of people that I was disgusted to even think about eating.”

“And you said you didn’t kill because you wanted to? Is that how you justify it?” My throat is burning, but still I berate him. Shirazumi’s face is clouded over with a disappointment.

“It’s not my fault they died because of it. They wanted it, they had it. It’s out of my hands if they couldn’t take it. Pitiful things. If only they were like me, they could have lived and tasted the glory of being free.”

My dizziness worsens, and the walls and floor seem to shift and move subtly, throbbing with the pain in my head. Could the drug I swallowed earlier be doing this?

“I’ve never had someone take the Bloodchip and survive in the three years I’ve been doing it,” Shirazumi explains. “I was about to give up. But then, Ryōgi woke up. I rejoiced just as much as you did, you’d best believe. We’re connected that way, aren’t we, pal?” He smiles, and I can do nothing but to keep my eyes on him. “Because it was I, Leo Shirazumi, and you, Mikiya Kokutō, that destroyed Shiki Ryōgi those three years ago. You ruined what she had inside of her, while I did the same to her outside world.”

I close my eyes. Is he right? Would Shiki have been better off four years ago if she hadn’t met me? Did we, together, ruin Shiki more than she could have done to herself?

“It was all so simple, Kokutō. Shiki’s habit of walking alone at night proved to be quite convenient for me. I tailed her, learning her favorite paths and patterns through the city. Then, I planned. I would kill someone that happened to wander along the path she would take, always just a little ways ahead of her, making sure

it was fresh. The first ones still saw me before I took the life from them, but the next few ones were skilled work. They never saw me. Like the one you saw after we said goodbye to each other on that day you went to the Ryōgi estate. It took some work, but the timing was just right for you to encounter it just the same time Shiki was heading back.”

My head seems to be splitting apart at the seams, and it overcomes me so much I can barely hear what Shirazumi is saying. My heart beats desperately, the blood like a fire through my body, and I did not know that it could be so difficult to force yourself to breathe.

“Last Monday, those four victims...it was you,” I struggle to say.

He nods with satisfaction. “Yeah, they weren’t any good at all. I convinced them to attack her, but all Ryōgi did was immobilize them, leaving them there to brood on their misfortune. Ryōgi never crossed the boundary. I had to clean her mess up after her, and kill them to make sure they didn’t talk. But if it made Ryōgi doubt herself for just one moment, then maybe it was worth it.” He walks back to the other side of the room, where he seems to have left some things. “It’s almost time. I’m sorry to have had to hurt you Mikiya. It’s all right. It’ll all be better in a while.”

Lying atop the floor is a knife, and a small, cylindrical object, both of which he takes in his one remaining hand. Something is suspicious about the knife. Something familiar about its slender figure, and the craftsmanship...like Shiki’s

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“No. What have you done to her?”

“Nothing that would permanently hurt her. It’s you who I need now though.” There is a notable shift in his voice, a softer, familiar tone of the person I once knew, though his words remain the same. “Forget about Shiki for a second. All she is doing is resting in the floor above, and tomorrow, I will even send her home.” He comes near me again, holding both objects in his hand. “Let’s start this. No need to worry. I’ve suffered failures up until now because I’ve only given them the medicine. But now I remember what Alaya said. That spell requires the consent of both involved to awaken the origin. This time, I’ll be right. If you only wish it, all will be yours. You won’t be a failure, will you,

Mikiya? You can be special.”

There it is again, that touch of anxiety in his voice. I shake my head, refusing. “Becoming special, but you lose yourself...” I cough, finding it difficult to breathe and speak at the same time. “Didn’t you say that you hated that, Shirazumi?”

“Words spoken in the heat of the moment. Words can be changed. Look at what happened to me when I was awakened! I can do things now that no normal human can do. I’m not a loser anymore, and *no one* can say I am weak. I do what I want, and live how I want to live. This is the kind of happiness the Leo Shirazumi from four years ago could never have hoped to achieve.”

Wishes of becoming special, of outstripping one’s peers. It’s the common dream of anyone. Shirazumi has his sins, but this is not one of them. “Who you are won’t be washed away, Mikiya. I am still here, still Leo Shirazumi. I mastered this impulse, and so can you. Don’t fear it. I’ve consumed things, consumed people, not under the influence of my origin, but my own will.”

*This is the true face of the man you knew, and more fool you if you think I lie. His last words to you were the death throes of a damned man trying to eke out that last bit of sympathy from you.* Miss Tōko always made sure to warn me.

“Aren’t you amazed at me? I want to see that face of yours lighting up, a surprised smile maybe. Why aren’t you surprised, Mikiya?!”

“Because I know.”

“What?” His face shifts into a blank amazement.

I did not lie. After all, I read his diary. I know that his slide into madness was his forfeiting of humanity. When the man I knew as Leo Shirazumi ceased to truly exist. He wanted me to save him, the last proof of his former dignity, or an echo of the past. And I want to do that, but how?

“You committed many murders,” I begin, “And so that you could run from your sins, you cast off yourself. You justified it with your love for Shiki Ryōgi, sought her out so that your killing would have meaning. But what sick love do you return to her?”

“Quiet!” He says with a raised voice. He goes near me, still lying and

unwilling to move, and kicks me square in the back. The pain flares, and recedes just as quickly, melting in with the other aches in my body. “We’re not talking about me, are we? We’re talking about you.” The annoyance is clear in his voice.

He stabs the knife into the ground, using it to cut the cylindrical object he holds into two. “It’s bad for you to take so much medicine in so little a span of time, but in this case, you’re leaving me no choice. You can thank your own stubborn attitude for it.” He takes hold of my hair, using it to pull me up and prop me against the wall. He puts the drug inside his mouth and chews it. Then, holding me down, he leans in to take my mouth in his. His tongue slides inside, bringing the drug along with it. I cannot resist. The drug goes down my throat. At last, he parts, and looks upon me with a face of calm expectation.

“That’ll solve everything. That’s a dosage ten times larger than normal. Your body can’t handle it for sure. But before it gets serious, you’ll take this and shove it down your throat,” he says as he produces a red blotter from his coat, letting it fall to the floor beside me. “And you’ll do it yourself, because you want to, you need to. And you’ll throw yourself away just like me, Mikiya.” My vision begins to get clouded, and everything seems to shift in and out of focus. “What are you waiting for? You want to be special, right? You want to be freed from the prison of your life, right? Then why won’t you listen? Eat it, Mikiya! I need you!”

I see the Bloodchip blotter on the floor, still within reach. I ignore it, but Shirazumi picks it up and puts it into my one good hand. When I don’t move, he begins to become visibly irritated.

“Just take it, Mikiya! The drugs will tear your body apart if you don’t. You’ll just fall over dead if you don’t eat it. Choose! Die as a human or live as something more. This one isn’t even a choice. Anyone will answer the obvious!”

He’s right. It isn’t even a choice for most. And yet, I shake my head at him.

“Why?” he asks, his voice sounding like it was wrung out of his throat. And though it would have perhaps been a better choice if I didn’t answer, I still speak.

“Maybe it’s just not that interesting.”

Shirazumi’s face looks as though it has frozen over, and the cracks in his hastily thought up plan begin to finally sound out across the silence. The fire in my blood feels like it could shoot out of any vein now, getting hotter until, I

suspect, it finally boils.

“When I look at you, Shirazumi, I see a broken thing. If becoming special means becoming like you, then maybe being special isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Being special isn’t for me.”

There is no amity left in Shirazumi’s eyes, none remaining of the little warmth he still had. My words have cemented me as his enemy.

“What are you saying? You have no other choice! I know you’re just like everyone else, always wanting to be better. I know you are!” Indignant and disbelieving, he shouts, and laughs like a madman as he looms over me. Whether it is a laugh borne of panic or irritation, I can’t say. “How can you even say things like that Kokutō? Dammit, you’re serious, aren’t you? You’re going to let yourself die, aren’t you? Why the fuck are you acting like this is all normal. It’s you who’s broken, yes. Always something off about you, I know it.”

“You’re the one that’s off, Shirazumi. Take a look at yourself and tell me I’m wrong,” I spit out at him, as if my body forced me to. It’s not doing any favors for how long I get to live, but if it makes him rethink himself, than maybe that’s alright too. “That’s what your daily life is like. When you first murdered someone, you couldn’t bear to see your crime and what you’d done. You ran away. And you deluded yourself into thinking that your murders were justifiable and inevitable, abnormal murders for an abnormal mind. A cold comfort and a weak excuse. And you gave in to your madness. You thought it would always be a convenient out, something you can tell yourself. But the truth is, even now, you’re still running.”

That was it, I think. Ever since he first killed a man, and fell into the plans of the man named Sōren Alaya, Leo Shirazumi the man was irredeemably lost. He thought himself a broken existence, and became such in time, and then he looked for Shiki, who he thought was a monster just like him. It reassured him of his monstrous existence if he knew other monsters were there, lurking in the night, just as broken as him.

Shirazumi simply says, “Shut up,” as he narrows his eyes. But if I don’t say what I have to say to him until the last, then coming here would have been meaningless.

“Shiki was brought up as a tool, and she’d never known anything else but the art of murder for a long time. But you took murder up as a crutch for your problems. It stinks of a lie. It’s wrong for the news to call you a murderous monster. Shiki’s got a far heavier weight on her shoulders than you. You don’t know how hard it is for her to hold in an impulse she had no choice in. You always had a choice, and you’ve made it.”

“Shut up, Kokutō. I’m warning you...”

“You’re stupid for thinking you’re the same as her. You’re a broken mirror, seeing what you can’t ever become. You’ve committed murder, but you deny the nature of your own sins. You’re just running like a coward. You’re no killer or murderous monster. Just a mad dog named Leo Shirazumi.” He wanted to be saved. But Miss Tōko was right. She’s always right, in the end. He can’t be saved, no matter how much I wanted to.

“I said shut the fuck up, goddamit!” His shout is replete with his anger, said like a potent curse. He retrieves Shiki’s knife from the floor, takes a moment to make sure that I cannot, or will not, move, and raises it above his head.

His breathing stops. Mine stops with it. He leaves the rest to his fury. The knife swings down.

There is a moment of blinding pain, as my head feels ready to split open when the blade bites deep into the brow, going downward fast, across my eye. And then the world disappears.

## / 6

The body slides from the wall, and settles into the floor in a slow, restive, pace. There, fallen on his face, unmoving, lies Mikiya Kokutō. The face seeps through with slick and rich blood, flowing down from the left side of his face and wetting the dirty concrete floor.

My hand holds a knife, soaked with blood, though it is not my knife. I stare at it dumbly, frozen in place, afraid to approach Mikiya's corpse, or disturb it even slightly. He's dead.

"I'm sorry. I...this wasn't in the plan." My small whispers echo in the room, but only the sound of rain rises in answer.

Tears form in my eyes. The only ally that the old Leo Shirazumi has ever had is now gone. Old memories come to fore. Memories of Leo Shirazumi stopping school, of jokes, and doubts, and threats, and lectures, all from disapproving faces and voices. But it was only Mikiya Kokutō who wished me luck. There can be no forgetting that memory. Leo Shirazumi's happiness then still lights a dim and fading beacon inside. But now that beacon that called back old emotions is fading, and it was I who killed it.

I know how easily men can die. The old Leo Shirazumi once tried to avoid the truth of it, but to his despair, he came face-to-face with it the first time he killed a man. But now, it is surely not my fault.

"Why did you side against me, Kokutō? When you were my one friend. You knew what I was. I thought you were the only one that wouldn't be my enemy." Even if the world did not accept me, then at the very least, he could accept me. If

only he were alive!

He was right. There is no love left for Shiki Ryōgi. The only one that needs her is me, the murderous monster. If she would be the same as me, what then? A special existence is significant only because of its singularity. The monster had already decided to kill her, even if she had regained her former purpose. Seeing what exactly I've lost lie before me, I realize. I, the murderer, needed the comfort of a companion; and I, Leo Shirazumi, needed Mikiya. Perhaps the only reason the old Leo persisted in living is because of him. When he stood in front of me, the cracks seemed to ease, a pressure released. Now, he lies still before me, and I feel nothing.

And so, the part of me that still holds the old Leo Shirazumi quiets and fades. I'm sorry, Kokutō. It looks like the part of me you believed in has now finally disappeared.

“As for the rest of it...” I utter with a lick of my lips.

All is well. I am alive. And so is Shiki Ryōgi. And once she returns to the way she was before, it will all be alright. Ah, yes. I don't need Mikiya anymore. Isn't this what I'd always wanted anyway? I'll beat the impulse inside of me, knowing someone like me exists out there. I will see her soon. I leave the room, climbing back up to the main warehouse, my garden of sin, where Shiki, the girl I'd loved for so long, awaits.

The blood roils and beckons inside of me, and I let slip a delighted smile. In my mind, I see her form from minutes ago, drenched in sweat and spit, and I gulp in anticipation. I want to do it to her now. With Kokutō dead, there's nothing left for her to sustain her stupid masquerading. The real murderer will come in her most enchanting form.

The drugs must still be affecting her. Even if she would lash out in rage, she'd still be unable to stand. No one can craft a better stage than this, surely. My tongue quivers, relishing the thought. I want to eat her inside and out; starting from the tips of her toes, then on to her body, drinking in her delicious sweat, delighting in the smell of her, the taste of her insides.

“Sweat?”

I stop in the middle of the foliage.

Yes, she *was* sweating when I shot the drug in her. But how could she, and why in such great amounts? All I shot her up with was a muscle relaxant. She shouldn't be sweating so much. It's almost like her body used the sweat to expel the toxin—

“No. It can’t be.”

I break into a sprint as soon as the thought enters my mind, hurrying back to the place I left Shiki alone. I push my way recklessly through the thick brush. I get there in a few seconds, hoping to see the scene that I wished for.

But no words spring forth now. In the little concrete path in the warehouse, the one place where the marijuana plants had not taken root, she is there, standing. With the narrowed, hellbent eyes contrasting with her overwhelming aura of composure, Shiki Ryōgi stands before me.

## / 7

There is a different sort of beauty even to Shiki's disheveled form. And it is precisely that which makes Leo Shirazumi forget to even breathe for a moment. The handcuffs that once bound her now hangs uselessly from her right arm like an overlarge accessory. There is no damage to the handcuffs themselves, nor a chink in the chain, or some breakage in its ring. The same cannot be said, however, of Shiki's left hand, from which fresh blood emerges red and whole. For it appears that in order to free her hands from the cuffs, she has had to gnaw through the base of her left thumb.

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Leo Shirazumi gives a vaguely amused laugh.

"You truly are the best," he says, though even his chuckling cannot hide the measure of temper in his voice. "A perfect monster." His neck even trembles as he says it. How pathetic. He's in a play and the acting's not up to snuff. I'm already tired of hearing this bastard's voice, and I've got no time to hear him prattle on about his world views.

"Now, Ryōgi, let's get this started. You are tied to me now," he says as he approaches me with surefooted steps, like a moth to a flame. But I do not even deign to look at him as I speak to him.

"Get someone else to go with you, because I sure as hell won't." It takes a while for him to register what I just said as he just stops there in his tracks, the most astonished look decorating his face.

“What? But...”

“I neither have the time nor the inclination to run around with a psycho like you.”

I mean, after all, what could I even do if I were a monster like him? And if that's all he can offer, than he's really going to have to step it up. I've known what I wanted long ago. I wanted the hollow in my soul to be filled. And perhaps my homicidal impulse may never be completely silenced, but I think, just maybe, I can keep it in check.

*Shiki's* reason for murder and *Shiki's* reason for murder were different things. The events of the past summer taught me that. I used to struggle so much, searching for that one, distinct sensation of living. But now, even that has become little more than a dim memory, and who knows if I ever found it. But I *do* know that the little hollow in my soul that Tōko once spoke of, isn't really so hollow any more. And because of that, I am not the *Shiki* of the past. I go back home, struggle to find what it means to be me, and if I can't discover it, then so be it. But I *won't* give in to the convenient excuse of being born with a murderous streak as an escape from my problems. I have to do that, for the sake of the one that fills the hollow in my soul, and for the sake of **Shiki**, who sacrificed himself for my happiness.

“You're kidding, right, Ryōgi?”

“Toodles, mister murdererous monster.” And with that, I start to walk. My body is still queasy from the drugs, my left hand hurts like a motherfucker, but even in that state, I pass through and beside Leo Shirazumi like he was just some stranger on the street. He doesn't even have a clue where to begin, though his exhalation begins to get louder as he stares at my back.

“So even you would betray me?” he asks, though his words become little but whispers in the din of the rain. Yes, I'm listening to nothing save for the sound of the rain. “I can't let that pass. I've done so much for you. Killed so many. And now you throw me away like trash? It's me you should be thanking! You should be mine!”

I stagger a little, but I right myself soon enough, and continue walking. Must be the drugs. So much of it in this place. I have to get out, no looking back. Get

out of here, and back into the familiar rain. But, he speaks again, this time clear over the noise despite its smallness.

“Oh, I see. Going back to Mikiya, aren’t we, Ryōgi?” A vague humor in his tone. “Then why not stay? Since he’s already here, after all.”

What? Did...did I hear him right? No, it can’t be. He couldn’t have followed me, chased after me.

“Y—you...” I can’t say it. And though I was determined not to look back, I do so now. Why now? When I was so close? I promised myself that there would be no murder, that I would just need to live.

“It’s your fault for being so slow to turn, Ryōgi. I tried to find someone a little more...cooperative. Of course, that failed.” What is he saying? His voice seems so low and faded, like my hearing was dampened from an abrupt noise. “This is your knife, right? Thanks for letting me borrow it. Pity I sullied it.”

A metallic clicking as he tosses the knife at the floor before my feet. The silver sheen of the blade is tainted by red stains. Someone’s blood. His blood. No. The smell of it is so familiar. The smell of his blood on that night beneath the heavy rain. There was no forgetting it.

“So...you’re gone now,” I say under my breath as I walk forward. I have to get the knife.

“I took care of him. So that you can finally do what you were supposed to do. Kokutō was sermonizing to me until the end, you know. One thing you can count on for him. He spouted some crap about us being opposites. Which is funny, isn’t it? We’re so alike, you and I!”

The rain beats down annoyingly hard on the roof of the warehouse. I kneel down to pick up my blade. The blood on it is fresh, newly supped from the body. I lost him, so near and so close a time.

You idiot. I told you to stay with Tōko, didn’t I? Dying so worthlessly like this...is just like you.

*Kill Shirazumi, and there’s no going back, Shiki.* He said that to hold me back, I know now. Yet the beast he tried to protect slaughtered him without a thought. I saw that beast as someone who needed to be put down. Maybe I was right after

all. Maybe.

I grasp the knife with my hands, one palm closed around the naked blade. I stand, holding it close to my chest. And with my head still turned to the ground, I speak.

“Fine. Let’s dance.” I can’t turn my eyes to look at him. Like before, even giving him the dignity of an equal glance would be giving him too much. “You said that you couldn’t forgive me. And on that one and only score, we agree, Shirazumi.”

And with that, the beast pushes himself to a run toward me. I ignore him. He will die. Or I will. But all that can be dealt with just a little later. The lingering warmth of the blood on the blade calls to me, to feel it before it disappears.

Leo Shirazumi leaps, an assault without finesse. But I don’t move. And the next moment, the beast strikes me, claws digging into my leg, tearing away flesh and drinking deeply of my blood before it spatters the floor red in a violent slash. He runs past me. But I do not move.

I hold the knife as tightly as I can, like an irreplaceable treasure. Memento mori. The warmth of the blood is immediate yet fading, the air or my body stealing its heat. A dying heart, pressed close to my chest. My body, too, feels colder now, so much that I feel the stirrings of a shiver. But the pain of the wound on my side is little and far away, like faint echoes of wind. For I still remember the pain of that rain-soaked night, when I chased him down and hurt him.

Only our frozen sighs played between us

As we watch our breaths fade slowly into stillness.

The enemy strikes me again, the claw-like nails ripping into the flesh of my other leg. He takes his time to kill me. He enjoys himself, playing with his prey. He does, after all, have all the time in the world.

The rain does not abate. It is a little thing, insignificant to most people, but to me, it is the most pleasing thing in the world.

Even the memory of rain:

Of an endless gray veil seen after school, where I heard you whistling.

He runs past yet again, gouging out flesh in my flank. There is a tearing noise, and the sound of something speckling the concrete. Nails dig as deep as bone, and little rivulets of blood drip down freely from my waist and legs, soaking the floor in a deep, vivid red. Even standing up is hard to bear.

It's **Shiki** who I remember now. Him, and the happy times he spent with you in those lazy sunset afternoons.

Even the memory of sunset:

Of a classroom ablaze in orange light, as you and I talked.

The beast's shows off his power now, his dominance. He goes faster than I've seen him, and still his attacks find their mark as if all the world was slow to it. I'd never be able to keep up. I'm lost, and my body follows. But my arm can still move. I have to stop the beast when he makes his fourth try.

Beside me you would smile, and that would be enough

To bid my soul rest

For a fourth time, it comes. He moves to hit my right arm. And though I see it coming, I cannot make myself move. How could I kill it?

Beside me you would walk, and that would be enough

To bid the rift between us close

I'm losing too much blood, and the world starts to look darker, more pronounced. At any moment, I could collapse. And still, I keep his words in my mind. I can't kill Leo Shirazumi. It's the last thing he asked of me. And I only have that thought to give value to me now.

Once, a moment in time

We stopped for shade, warm unmoving sunlight peeking through leaves

But I am glad. You were there for me, ready to pull me back when I strayed, always ready to accept me. And those times, though I never said it, were the happiest times of my life.

And there, as you laughed, you said that one day, we'd stand in the same place

The beast draws close again, for the fifth, and final time. He aims for the neck now. We both know what will happen. A vital artery cut, and my lifeblood gushing out as it all ends.

They were words that I've yearned to hear for so long.

Death approaches, and if I look back now, I would see it smiling, proudly and broadly boasting. Every scratch it scores against me is another tearing of that happy lie, that illusion of peaceful existence. Of a past that never came to pass, of boring student life, of the remains of days with no conflict, and no monsters, and no madness.

Now only fleeting memories of days never fulfilled.

I thank you. But I am truly sorry.

I finally raise my head, seeing with the inner Eye, the Arcane Eyes, and before me, I see my enemy's death, tracing themselves all over his body. I know I'll lose it all of what I am that you've put your faith on. But I've lost you now, even though I loved you. And I know no one will be beside me now, there to pull me back to your world. But still...but still...this wild animal killed you. And that is one thing I cannot forgive.

My enemy is coming, reckless and complacent in victory. It will be an easy thing to kill him. I shift my feet slightly. The floor is water. And I need to be light as a swan upon it. Then the end will be mercifully quick.

There it is. Shirazumi's one arm is extended, and upon it dances one of the lines of death. I let him come close, close enough to smell him. And when his

arm is almost upon my neck, I swing the knife that lies just below it upward, sweeping the arm and casting it aside effortlessly as it loses strength and dies. No time to spare. I shift just to his left, bringing my knife arm around and down in a wide swing at the line on his left leg, killing it. He begins to stumble as he loses the balance on his dead leg. Then his right leg in one swift motion. Then, in the moment that he is still in the air, I plunge the blade deep into his chest in one clean and solid stroke, finally pushing him to the ground.

The knife stands upright like a cairn marker, piercing right through to the heart. Shirazumi coughs only once, and it is over. The face he donned in death is one of astonishment, as if he was more concerned at how quickly he had died than the fact that he had died at all.

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Leo Shirazumi lies truly dead in the warehouse floor as Shiki still grasps the knife sticking out of his chest with both hands, having to lean down on one knee as she does so. Angled light comes through from the windows, dull and ashen, bathing the girl and the corpse in pale illumination that makes her look like some kind of psychopomp, solemn and colorless.

No blood spills from Leo Shirazumi's corpse. The wounds in fact, seem very trifling, save for the one in the chest. Yet he is dead, blood and all. Such was the power of the Arcane Eyes. There is nothing left to spill out. The only blood that lies scattered on the warehouse floor comes from Shiki's own body. Blood from the arm, the leg, and the body, from wounds that she still struggles to withstand. It doesn't worry her too much, however. She has worked through worse before.

Even so, the hands that a moment ago grasped the knife tightly now seem to lose whatever animating force they had, and fall away to Shiki's side as she herself collapses with back to the floor. A large sigh escapes her lips. Her breaths are large gulps of air, struggling through the pain. She lets her body rest now, so that she can call for some kind of help later.

"There's no use to it," she whispers to herself as she looks up at the light of the sky. The scene outside the windows, however, is still the same rain as before. It's

*always in winter, she thinks, under these skies, that I dirty my hands with blood.*

*I can't go home anymore. You would only be angry if I showed up at your doorstep, dirtied.*

*“But I know you'd still wait for me.” You walked with me. You grasped my bloodied hands and showed me the way home. They were times covered in hazy dream, now fleeting and soon to vanish.*

She gulps, and her consciousness sways and flickers as unsteadily as the light of a vigil candle, and there is something fair, she thinks, in the passing of a life. She steadies her breath, not to live, but perhaps, finally, to sleep the sleep of the just. The eyes that drink in the sunlight show rare tears. She remembered her old promise to herself when she awoke, to only cry when it was of worth for the tears. Nothing seemed more appropriate than his death.

She closes her eyes, and then she grows quiet. Her thoughts have no regrets. *But it is only a matter of time before I become as mad as Shirazumi; a monster that tasted warmth, and can never go back, crossing the boundary to be empty of anything.*

## **The Second Homicide Inquiry - VII**

The world disappeared. That's what I first thought.

I cough, spitting out something liquid from what feels like it had come from inside my chest. Somewhere inside my body, something still isn't allowing me to die. The first things I discover I can move are my arms, and then my upper body follows suit. My legs move, but only a little. They feel asleep, and no matter how much I try, I can't move them as strongly as I'd like. I creep along to the nearest wall beside me, clasp a hand firmly on a windowsill, and pull myself up, the wall largely doing much of the work of supporting me.

Eyesight is returning, but everything is mists and shadow, the outlines of things shocked with white and red. My sense of pain still struggles to keep up. It hurts somewhere in my body. I can't rightly place where exactly, but somewhere there is a dull, throbbing pain. And then I remember.

I place a hand on my left eye, and it comes away wet and red. No small amount of blood. Yet strangely the pain is less pronounced than I'd expected. The bleeding surprisingly isn't as bad as anticipated either. The drugs that Shirazumi gave me had some influence on that, maybe? Still, the wound itself is hideous to feel. The last memory I have before falling unconscious was the knife, carving its way from my forehead to left cheek, slicing up my left eye along its path. It's probably too late to save it. It's a miracle that I'm even still alive, and that my right eye didn't die along with the left.

With a hand on the wall to steady myself, I carefully make my way inch by inch to the stairs leading up to the main warehouse floor, and climb up, having to

mostly drag my legs as I hold the bannister and pull myself step by step. Upstairs, I find the floor overrun with grass. I can't readily identify what they are, and at this point I really don't care. Even in the pain and the blood and the anesthetic effect of the drugs, there is only one thought on my mind.

"Shiki," the word is on my lips, like a prayer. Without a wall to cling to, it becomes much more difficult to walk. The warehouse is cavernous, and the plants only compound my lack of keen eyesight. I take my first step, and immediately fall to the ground. A flash of pain shoots through my entire body, and the world is black again for a moment before all returns like before, and I find myself on the ground.

What am I doing? Stuck in some bloodied, battered, wounded, and bruised body, in some kind of limbo between life and death. I can only hope that the fall didn't open some already closed wounds. The ground beneath me is soil. With my knees having buckled and offering no more strength, I have no choice but to crawl upon it. It's only then that I realize the enormity of the structure I'm in, and how little I am, and how much the grass can hinder vision at this height. My left eye feels like it's being burned with hot pincers, my right eye shows me images of wraith-like outlines, and I can do nothing to remedy it.

Out of breath, I stop for a moment. Shiki being here was only a hunch on my part anyway. I have to pace my progress unless I want to kill myself. So I advance slowly, trying to calm my thoughts.

Should I find Shiki already crossing blades with Leo Shirazumi, what am I supposed to do then? *Kill Shirazumi, and there's no going back.* That's what I said to her.

No going back. I never wanted her to commit murder. Because I love her. And I want to keep on loving her. I only wanted to give her joy. I didn't want her to cause pain to anyone anymore. Call it selfishness. Yet even she detests murderers.

Once, I said I believed in her. I wonder if that's still true, or if they were always just convenient words I used to hide something. Whatever the case, I have to believe in her now, and in the possibility that maybe, she can come back, despite my words.

At a snail's pace, I cut through the grass, heading towards what I think is the center of the entire place. Eventually, my arms chance upon a plot of ground that isn't soil, but concrete. I find myself at a wide path where none of the grass grows, and it is here, in the center of it all, that I find Shiki. Beside her is the body of Leo Shirazumi, intact but still as a grave. At a distance and at first glance, there is no sign of life from either.

So what I thought was true. Shirazumi is dead by your hands, Shiki. For the moment, I set aside the thought. For now, I have to know what happened to her. With great difficulty, I manage to pull myself that last stretch to where she lies. Her eyes are closed, her face seems finally at peace. Her body is wounded previously on her legs, her waist, and an arm, and her clothes and skin is dirtied with blood, sweat, and dirt. Her face is pale, and there is little warmth in her frail body...and yet, her chest rises and falls with a measured pace.

Alive. Relieved, I turn my attention now toward Leo Shirazumi. In the state he is in, there is no doubt he is dead.

I am sorry old friend. No matter what situation you had found yourself in, you did not deserve to die. But you are the only one who died today, and the only victim among us three that has a right to be mourned. But still, that does not stop me from being happy at Shiki being alive. I do not pity you. On the contrary, I curse you. It is only because of you that Shiki had to perform her terrible act.

A pale, slender finger touches my cheek, caressing it, lightly tracing over skin and blood. It was her finger.

"Are you crying, Kokutō?" Shiki says as she regards me with faint, sleepy eyes. There is a welcome surprise on her face as her hand reaches out softly to feel the wound on my cheek, and the ruined eye. The white fingers turn red. Shiki tries to rise, but grunts, and gives up the effort. And I'm in no state to carry her out of here. So we lie there for a while, facing each other, taking in the face of the other.

In the rain, only our frozen sighs play between us,

As we watch our breaths fade slowly into silence.

"I killed Shirazumi," Shiki whispers.

“Yeah,” I nod.

She turns to face the remains of Leo Shirazumi one last time, looking at the terrible thing she can be capable of, then turns back toward the sky outside the window.

“There’s so much I’ve lost, and so much I’ve left to lose,” she says in a sad, empty voice.

She thinks she’s lost what’s important, and lost herself in the process. Maybe she even thinks she’s lost me. It’s as her grandfather told her once. And following those words, she thinks she will meet death alone, in a desolate place.

“It doesn’t matter now. I told you once before, didn’t I? I’ll carry it in your place.” A drop of blood from my ruined eye falls to Shiki’s face, a red tear for a sinner. It was last summer when I swore that to you as you smiled for the first time under the rain. I said that I’ll carry your sins in your place. So I’ll keep it inside of me. And until the day you die, you’ll never be alone again.

“But I’m a murderer.” This voice is faint, barely a whisper above the air, blaming only herself, and close to tears like a child’s. She knows that the sin will never truly disappear, and no matter how much she asks for forgiveness, her sorrow is ultimately up to her. Even I wonder if forgiveness can come to me, and it will be a harder question for other people.

“I told you that murder is the last line you cross. And still you went ahead and crossed it. Just can’t learn, can you? Maybe I’m just a little cross. And don’t think crying will get you out of this one.”

“Huh. You’re a heartless piece of work.”

“Yeah. Your little tricks aren’t going to work.”

And that’s it. With those words, that distinctive manner of how she says her words, I know that she’s back. She knows it too. There is a tranquility to her now. She smiles the littlest smile, and closes her eyes in relief, so calmly that you’d think she’s asleep. Another red tear falls to her cheek.

I take the dirtied and bloodied girl under my nearly numb arm, cradling her shoulders as I help her get up. And I move to embrace her, to hold her tight against me so strongly, as if death itself was coming for us both and it would be

the last thing I could leave to her. And in that embrace, I promise her something.

“Shiki...I’ll never let go of you again.” The words fade away into the endless rain. Perhaps the words didn’t matter. Perhaps they never did. Perhaps all that matters is that I can hold her close to me now, and that her arms wrap themselves tightly around my back, returning my embrace with the brief strength that I can feel in her fingertips.

February has come and gone, but winter still leaves its charms on the city. The temperature is still low, and the news even says it's going to be packed with snow tomorrow. Even now, in the beginnings of March, the last whispers of winter can be felt seeping through the skin. Spring, it seems, is still a distant dream away.

The murderous monster that had threatened the peace of the streets is dead now, found by the police to have died under mysterious causes. The public statement said that the heart just stopped, definitely before the stab wound in the chest ever mattered, and that anyway, it had just barely missed the heart. The medical examiners, perplexed, would doubtlessly have declared it some kind of overdose, and the stab wounds and slash marks on his body are destined to haunt the weeks of some poor homicide detective somewhere until the case was compiled in a folder and shunted to a file cabinet, cold and all forgotten.

It was me who managed to get Mikiya to a hospital that night. He was too injured to really carry on. I on the other hand went to Tōko for a replacement hand. The thumb I had bitten off was the false prosthetic that Tōko had long ago provided for me, so it was an easy thing to replace. The household doctor of the Ryōgi knew how fast I recovered from these sorts of things, and recommended nothing special. Sure enough, I was largely recovered before February had even ended, while Mikiya is still in bed rest at the hospital, where he needed to stay for two weeks.

Well, until today that is. Today is the day he finally gets out from the hospital that he has repeatedly made clear that he hates. And that's why now, standing

sheltered in the shadow of a fairly large tree outside the very same hospital, I brave the cold weather and wait. From here, I can see the national hospital's large lobby, and I watch the cars going around the hospital's elliptical driveway, pulling up and driving away as people come and go around the entrance.

I do this for two hours until finally, I spot a man clad all in black make his way out of the large entrance. From trousers to jacket, he wears the color of his choice, his only concession to fashion. I see a white spot upon his arm, which surprises me for a moment until I discover that it's just a bandage. When he exits the hospital, he turns back the last time to bow at some nurses and a doctor before briskly heading to where I stand. I do not call out, or wave; only wait.

"So not even one visit to the hospital from you," Mikiya Kokutō says with a playful frown on his face.

"Your fool sister Azaka insisted on it. She said she'd kill me if I showed myself in the hospital, and I think she really means it." I return his frown with an expression of disappointment.

"Reliable sort, isn't she?" He nods. "So, should we go? Take a cab, maybe?"

"It's not like there's three football fields from here to the station. C'mon, it's a short walk, and it'll do your legs some good."

"Whatever works for you. I'm blaming you for any broken bones, though," he adds before walking ahead. I bring myself up alongside his right and keep pace with him.

Afterwards, everything settles into some semblance of routine. We talk, like we used to do, as we walk in the journey from one place to the next; in this case, down this gently sloping hill road as we head toward the train station. I chance a glimpse at Mikiya's face. He's grown his hair out, I observe. Well, the left side at the very least. His bangs are just long enough to cover his left eye and much of his cheek.

"Your left eye..." My voice trails off.

"Yeah, it's gone for good. Shizune was right. Remember her?"

"That girl with the future sight we met once, right? Yeah, I remember her."

“She told me something interesting once. That if I stayed with you, I would meet a cruel end. She was right, you know. My ‘eye’ certainly did.” He laughs, seemingly impressed at his own joke. I’m not quite sure what the proper response is to such a stupid joke. “My right eye’s all fine, though, so it’s not such a big thing. Depth perception’s going to be hard to adjust to, is all. Speaking of which, can you move over to my left? I’m still not used to the feeling, so having you on that side would make me feel a lot safer.” He doesn’t bother to wait for me to respond and promptly shifts himself so that I’m on his left side, after which he leans heavily on my shoulder. “Woah, wait, what the heck are you doing?” I say with just a hint of surprise. A frown returns to his face as he glares at me.

“What? Makeshift crutch. Guess you gotta take care of me while I get used to this,” he explains, as if it were all natural. I return his glare with a sullen one of my own.

“Oh, come on. Why do I have to be saddled with this?”

“Because I want you to. But if you don’t want to, just say so.” Something happened to him in that hospital, I muse, if he’s saying all this so matter-of-factly. We stare at each other, and for the first time, it’s me who breaks first. I turn away from him, attempting to hide my wildly blushing cheeks.

“Ah, it ain’t that bad,” I reply in a grumbling voice. Mikiya looks at me with a wry smile on his face. Optimism must be in his blood. And it’s getting to be so bad it’s genuinely infectious. “But I do need to go to school starting tomorrow.”

“Skip classes for a day. Spring break’s coming up anyway. I’m sure your teachers will understand.”

“What?” Sir *I-don’t-care-you-should-be-at-school* Mikiya Kokutō telling me to play truant? Now I know something really happened in that hospital. Maybe I’ll even ask him later. Right now, the only reaction I have to his statement is to laugh.

“Hey, I was being kinda serious, though.”

“I know, man, I know,” I laugh as I explain. “I was just thinking it’s still pretty selfish for you.” At that, he produces an awkward smile.

“You’re right. Years ago, I fell in love with you without telling you. And in that spirit, I’m hoping you’ll let me slide butting into your life once or twice,” he says, without a hint of reluctance in his face. There’s a succinct and witty rejoinder to that somewhere in my head, but for now, I decide to leave it there. Because at the very least, the *Shiki* of the past—

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Shiki? Ah, did that make you feel uncomfortable? You always told me that you didn’t like lines like that.” He sounds a bit disappointed. I’d planned to keep quiet, but what the hell. Just this once, maybe I can just say it outright to him.

“That’s not necessarily true.” I turn away from him completely now, trying to find the courage to say it without making a complete idiot of myself. “*Shiki* might have hated them once. Now...well, maybe they’re alright.”

Ah, fuck. I knew it’d be embarrassing. I’m never letting something like that pass my lips a second time. I look back at him tentatively now, though it seems he’s more surprised than anything, as if he’d just seen a whale flying in the sky. I grab him firmly by the hand to break the spell. I pull him along, quickening our pace as we descend the slope of the hill. The station’s just up ahead, and through it, home. The hand that I hold responds with a surer strength of grip than my own, and for some reason, even that small, trivial thing makes me happy. I resist the urge to grin as broadly as my face would allow.

When we reach the station, we take the train back to that familiar, wellworn, well-trodden city of gray towers and glass sentinels, of darkened streets and uncertain existences, where a hundred new stories are born and concluded each day. The way home is long, and winding; distant, and easy to lose one’s way if you don’t know your way around. But luckily, I have someone to share the road with.

For once, my hand didn’t reach out for a knife. It reached out to the hand I wanted. And whatever the future brings, I don’t think I’ll ever let it go. And so, my story concludes here. I’ve made my peace with my past and my present, and now it’s time to live the future. All that’s left is for this season to end. I’ve never once truly looked forward to the ending of winter and the coming of spring, not once observed the importance of their passing. But now, I find myself watching, and waiting, with a great anticipation.



# Empty Boundaries



At the moment, the city is knee deep into the worst snow it's had in four years, and to make matters worse, it's falling in March. The volume of the snow is so thick, and the temperature so low, that no one at all would be surprised to see the entire city frozen in place. Even at nights, the white spots drift down onto the roofs and streets in a languid pattern, showing no signs of abating, like the sky is determined to drown it in a new ice age. Tonight, at midnight, is one such frigid night.

Not even the shadow of a person can be sighted on the streets tonight, and the unceasing white veil of the snow is permeated only by the illumination of street lights. It should be dark, but even the darkness can't resist being tainted by the gathering white. In that scene of contrasts can be seen one boy, strolling through the late hours. He has no particular purpose in mind. Something called him out here, a premonition that promised something in a place so familiar.

He walks casually, as if time didn't truly matter, holding aloft his black umbrella as he presses his way through the thick snowfall. And at last, he finally chances upon the girl, standing there, just as she did four years ago. Dressed in her kimono in the midst of the desolate white night, the girl stares blankly at the void. And like four years ago, the boy calls out to her in a voice at ease.

"Hey."

The girl in the kimono turns slowly to glance over her shoulder, and smiles sweetly.

"Good evening, Kokutō. It has been quite a while now, hasn't it?" asks the strange girl, Shiki Ryōgi, as the gentle smile on her lips speaks of a past where he had known the boy so long ago. The voice, however, is cordial, not intimate.

The boy looks at her, seeing the appearance of the **Shiki** he knows, but it is not her. Not the long-gone Shiki either. This one is someone else completely.

"I knew it'd be you. I had a feeling we'd meet each other again here. Shiki's asleep now, isn't she?"

"You may call it such. The words now must be for you and me." The lazy smile lingers on the corners of her lips.

"So who are you, really?" the boy inquires.

“I am me. Two individuals named Shiki reside within, but I am not either one. I am the one that resides in the hollow between two hearts, two minds, two souls. Or perhaps it can be said that I am that hollow.” Her hand brushes lightly upon her breast as she closes her eyes, almost in prayer. “That which is discordant. That which is hated. That which is intolerable. Accept these things and all others, and never know pain. But there is another, in turn. That which is harmonious. That which is desired. That which is permitted. Reject these things and all others, and know nothing but pain.”

The boy realizes that she is talking of what *Shiki* was, once before, when both *Shiki* and **Shiki** existed at the same time inside of her.

“One affirms, one denies,” the strange girl continues. “She is complete, but isolated. Alone. Don’t you agree? A single color, perfect and unsullied, is only so because it was not joined with others. It cannot change, forever remaining the same color. That was what they were. Two opposites, sprung from the singular primal origin. The gulf between them is empty. As such, it is where I dwell.”

“So why call me out then, here of all places, Shiki? Oh, mind if I call you ‘Shiki?’” The boy’s head is titled, showing confusion, but the girl seems to think nothing of it.

“Not at all,” she replies. “Shiki Ryōgi is my name, after all. I would be pleased if you called me by my name. Perhaps it may give me meaning after so long.” There is something about her voice, thinks the boy, that strikes him as both childlike and adult.

They talked like that for some time, whiling away the minutes with meandering and fleeting talk: The boy talking to her with a sort of familiarity, and the girl listening closely with an air of vague bemusement, as though nothing had truly changed. In a sense, nothing had. Though the girl knew that she was so hopelessly *different* from the boy.

“So let me get this straight. Shiki doesn’t remember what happened on this road four years ago?” the boy asks abruptly. That was the time, he remembers, when they were both still high school students. He remembered that he had asked *Shiki* when they had met again in the school, that they had met before. *Shiki* had only answered that she couldn’t remember.

“I am afraid not. I am different from her. *Shiki* and **Shiki** were two sides of the same coin, and their memories were twinned together. But I am a separate existence from either of them, so Shiki will not remember what words pass between us tonight.”

“I see,” he mutters with a hint of disappointment. It was on March 1995 when he met her. They chanced upon each other on this road, on a day of cold snowfall just like today, when both were on the cusp of entering high school. He had been on his way home that night when he spotted a lone girl on the sidewalk, standing still and staring up at the twinkling stars. His plans to go home and sleep were temporarily forgotten, when he greeted her with a simple “Good evening,” as if he were greeting a good and old friend. The snow was just as beautiful then as they are now, enough for two complete stranger’s paths to cross.

“In truth, there is something else I must ask you, Kokutō. Sadly, it will be the most important, the most final of questions I can ever ask you. It is to that purpose that I have revealed myself tonight.” The girl stares into the boy with eyes that belie the age that her appearance would imply.

“What is it you desire?” she asks gently. The question comes as a surprise to the boy, and he struggles at first for words of reply. The girl keeps her mechanical, almost amused expression on her face. “Make your wish, Kokutō. The wishes of people are a trivial thing, and it seems Shiki has taken quite the peculiar liking to you, so I grant you this one privilege. What is it you desire?” she repeats.

The girl extends a hand toward the boy, her eyes a transparent well, drinking deeply of the void-like sky, as if it looked out over a vast abyss that knows no end, and it is reflected back in those delicate eyes, separated from the common thinking of humanity. It was like looking into the eyes of some god.

“I don’t know...” he answers, his voice trailing off and becoming little as he takes a moment to ponder. He looks into her eyes, not in disinterest, but in something approaching faith. “I suppose...I don’t really need one,” he finally answers with a certainty.

“Yes,” she whispers disappointedly, almost like a sigh. But there is a shadow of relief in it as well. “Yes, I suppose I knew you would say that.” Her eyes part

themselves from the boy and returns to the white darkness where she seems more comfortable.

“How could you know, if you aren’t really Shiki?” he asks, amused. The girl only replies with an appreciative sidelong glance and an acknowledging nod.

“Indulge me, then. Tell me where in a man his character lies,” she suddenly asks, as casually as asking about something no more trivial than tomorrow’s weather, as if she knew any answer the boy could give would not surprise her in the least. And yet, the boy puts a hand on his chin, and tries to look the scholar.

“Well, if I had to give an answer, I suppose...well no doubt it’s connected to sentience and sapience, so it’s a matter of the mind, I guess.” The doubt in his voice is clear as day. Not surprisingly, the girl shakes her head slowly. “No. The soul dwells in our memory, and it in turn animates us. But it does not mean that it need only be fed with electricity to continue its dream of fragile reality, deprived of a body that houses it. The mage that Shiki once met spoke as you did, that a man’s character is in the mind. A mistake. You, your character, and your very soul is shaped by travails, given form in your body. A personality does not arise whole-formed from just a mind and the sentience that accompanies it. It is through our bodies, allowing us access to all these visceral experiences, that we take our steps into precious self-awareness, and where we form our characters as extroverts, or introverts, or any number of other archetypes. A ‘personality’ shaped by sentience alone cannot hope to even reflect on what it is. Such a thing is more akin to a calculator, I should think. If there is no personality, then it becomes necessary to create one, starting from the very beginning.

“Yet rather than the body arising from the existence of sentience, the body is crafted well before the emergence of any kind of sentience. But the body alone carries no sense of sapience. The body is simply there. But even within such a simple thing, something drives it, something that connects it to a primal origin. I grew from such origins, born from sentience, raised alongside the other two.”

The boy nods. He’s heard of this before; that there are three things any human must have to live: the psyche, the soul, and the body. This girl then, was Shiki’s true nature, what mages had called the origin of a person. A thing of nothingness, of void, the primal nature of someone.

The girl casts her eyes downwards, looking as though she had read the boy's thoughts exactly. "Such is what I am, a character produced not from the mind but the body, wholly different from *Shiki* or **Shiki**, who arose from her fractured psyche. I am the power behind them, but I am powerless before them. She is the embodiment of the ryōgi, of two extremes, the symbol of yin and yang given form, a great continuum of dynamism and entropy. I am of the empty boundary in between, the channel that allowed both to have united thoughts. I am their beginning, and I am their end, connecting them to the spiral of origin. Without me, they would have been nothing but fractured and sundered existences." The girl smiles a deadly smile, tinged with something approaching a cold taste for blood.

"Don't be surprised if I say I can barely follow," the boy mentions, "but I guess the way I'm getting it is that you're the one that made the existence of two Shikis possible."

"The essence of it, I suppose. The origin that never reveals itself. In truth, I should have withered away long ago, an unneeded and alien part of the body. My origin is emptiness, and I would never have claimed intelligence or any grander meaning. But it was the Ryōgi dynasty had other plans. They wove their meager Arts and gave me sentience. *Shiki* and **Shiki** arose just as much from the need to protect myself as from their experiences." *Shiki* and Shiki; yin and yang; virtue and vice. The boy remembers the mage Tōko Aozaki saying to him once before: that they were separated not by conflict but by utility; the desire for the Ryōgi dynasty to pursue its mysterious ambition.

"What a perilously unwise game they play, these dynasties," the girl continues. "I should have died before I was ever free of the womb, but instead, they gave me a sense of self. You see, any animal comes into the world with a body and sapience worthy of each other, but I, born of the origin of nothingness, must needs die. I should have never existed for long. Tōko told you of this, did she not? Of reality's uncanny ability to fight what is irrational, and unnatural, solely through consensus. Produced from such an unnatural origin as nothingness, I would have petered out unceremoniously before *Shiki* ever achieved an iota of consciousness. But the Ryōgi dynasty had spells that bid me awake, and so I did, and the origin awoke in *Shiki* as well. Through it, I could see the material reality.

I found it too boring, however, and passed that responsibility to *Shiki*. Can you not see? How everything in this reality is so predictable, and how the rules that bind it are so weak and mutable?”

Her eyes are simple and innocent, and yet they seem to almost laugh cruelly and mockingly at everything.

“But even you have your own will,” states the boy, looking at the girl almost pitifully now.

The girl nods and says, “Indeed. Not so large a surprise. All have an origin that carries some small spark of intelligence, but it never comes to fore at the beginning of life. It is the mind of a person that must carry that first burden, and transmute that along with the body to a personality. Thus does the little intelligence of the origin lose meaning and fade. Yet a man’s personality, knowing nothing of the body that made it whole, will assume in his ignorance that his personality formed from sentience alone. The order seemed to be wholly different in my case, however. Still, at least I can thank Shiki for our little chat tonight. Without memories to tap into, I might not have understood words let alone hold a conversation. I would just be a little spark, worth next to nothing.”

“I see. So without Shiki, you wouldn’t be able to perceive the outside world because—”

“Because I am but a simple mechanism operating on the instructions of something inside me, yes. Just a vessel with sight turned inward, a body connected to death and entropy, and what mages call The Akashic Record, or the spiral of origin. A worthless connection, as far as I’m concerned.” She takes a single, small step forward, extends her hand and lightly touches upon the boy’s left cheek as light as a feather. Her pale fingers brush back the bangs, revealing the vicious scar beneath. “At this moment, however, it may prove of use. I can make this wound disappear. I would be able to help someone, and make some kind of difference in the world. But you said you needed no wish.”

“That’s right. I know Shiki better for destroying things, and it feels sort of weird and just a bit suspicious for you to be asking.” The boy gives a plain smile, not truly knowing himself how serious that statement is. The girl turns away from him then, as one would turn away from glaring sunlight, and retreats her

hand, holding it close to her chest.

“An understandable observation. Shiki is very much a creature of destruction. I suppose you still cannot see me as anything else but her, in the end. My origin is emptiness, and because of this, Shiki can see the death of everything. When Shiki slept for two years, her senses shattered and dead, she gazed into the emptiness inside her for so long that she came to know the welcoming embrace of death. Shiki floated on the vast abyss of the spiral of origin, alone inside the void, where she awoke. And no matter how much she denied it, her soul called out to that base drive, that voice inside her that told her that she could kill. Her power stemmed from that. Much like Fujino Asagami, her Arcane Eyes made her play an entirely different game than common men. Her Eyes expressed their connection to the spiral of origin through death, calling forth the destined entropy of all things and manifesting it. But my connection to it is far more profound. And it allows me to see everything so...*differently*.”

The way she says this last word was a mixture of delight and sadness, and the boy got the distinct sense that even though she explains, she knows her words would never truly reach anyone. “The spiral of origin is the primordial beginning of all things in this pattern of reality. All things pass through the great wheel, their natures and their histories—past, present, and future—are connected to it. It is thus a vast and empty place. It reflects what I am, in a way. I am connected to it, and I am a part of it as well. *I am* it. Which is why the greatest feats that mages can only dream of are allowed me. I can change the very structure of elementary particles. I can transmute evolution itself, changing everything into something wholly different. All creation dances to the tune of magic and the melody of the arcane Art. I can bend the rules of this lie of a reality, this prison that keeps so many minds in sleep. I can break it as easily as a twig. I can remake this world. I can unmake it. I can make a new one whole cloth.”

And, as if seeking the most inappropriate punctuation to her statement, she giggles slightly, a snicker of contempt as sinister as her smile. “But there is no meaning in such feats. The destruction of lies is tiring work, and I find it no different from dreaming. And so I choose to see nothing, to think nothing, to live in dreamless slumber and in self-imposed quiescence. A decidedly different dream than Shiki had, clearly. The girl is so transparent sometimes, don’t you

think so? I see right through her, just as I do with everything. Her, reality...even myself.”

Her voice becomes a whisper in the infinite night, her eyes affixed to it with such an intensity, it feels as if she would never have the chance to see its like again. Perhaps she never will. “But what can I do?” she asks herself. “I am but a body, bound to her dream. Hers is the material, and mine the soul, sharing a body connected to the great Akasha. I know everything that has passed and will pass, and it is a bitter, meaningless tedium, enough to close your eyes to the entire affair. And so it will be as before. I shall sleep, undreaming, unthinking, in eternity. I pray only that when entropy claims this body, that the dream live on, and I with it.” Snow falls tranquilly upon her words with the weight of a burial.

The boy says nothing, looking only at the side of the girl’s face as she looks up and over the night. Noticing this, the girl speaks in a restrained voice, but almost scolding. “Silly isn’t it? It is nothing to fret over, I assure you. But having you hear this makes me happy enough to tell you one more thing. Shiki misunderstands herself. She has never truly loved murder. Her impulse stems from me, her origin. So fear her not, Kokutō. She is no murderous monster. Only me. Always me.”

The grin, never far from her face, seems to say to the boy in slight and sly motions that it is a secret kept between them only. The boy is left to puzzle out how anyone would believe him anyway. How can he tell anyone a secret kept between himself and a soul, born from primal intelligence? Who would even believe him?

“I must leave soon, I fear,” the girl says. “I ask again, Kokutō, do you wish for nothing? Even in when you crossed paths with Leo Shirazumi, you chose the path of temperance, and didn’t waver from it until the end, when the choice to be made was clear. It is a wholly strange choice, I must declare. Do you not want something better than this?”

“Nah. Here, right here, like this...it’s fine, I think.”

“Maybe it is,” the girl whispers. She looks at him then with almost envious eyes, and she thinks. Humans tear and scrabble for answers, creating a never-ending spiral of conflict. Shiki Ryōgi personifies this. And yet here is this boy, of

a character that puzzles the girl. Hurting no one, even himself, taking nothing, and asking for nothing. He stands amidst the battering winds and waves, melting into the flow of time as his own until he breathes his last. A common life.

Could it be possible to live such a life? Surely not from the start. Perhaps that too is some different kind of “special.” So in the end, everyone is still distinct, leading lives whose meaning comes entirely from their own self. The seed is always the same, but it is they who chart different courses, becoming margraves of their own empty boundaries, guarding their own normality. Sometimes, across borders, people reach out, sometimes they don’t. And yet they live.

There is a long stillness from both the boy and girl. The great white expanse seems to call toward her as she ponders.

No one will ever try to understand him, no one to ever give him the time of day. Always normal, no one to see into him deeply. Unhated, with no one to draw close to. And yet, to Shiki, a symbol of happy times. Who among them is truly alone? No one might ever truly say.

The snowflakes drift about in the air, the girl as entranced as she has been the entire time. Yet in her eyes is a quiet regret. And then, she murmurs something under her breath, so silently that it almost seems as if it was meant only for her, and that it was never meant to escape her lips. “He will live ordinary, and die ordinary. What solitude,” says Shiki Ryōgi, as she stares out at the darkness that holds no beginning and no end, words of parting barely heard.

The boy saw the girl off, knowing that they will never meet again.

The snow did not abate, burying the darkness in little white shards, fluttering gently like the wings of tired butterflies, falling to the ground. “Farewell, Kokutō,” the girl had said before she left. The boy could say nothing.

“Silly me. I know we’ll meet again tomorrow,” the girl had said before she left. The boy could say nothing.

And after that, for a long while, longer than he could say, he stood out there in the lonely street, looking out into the winter night sky. It was only when dawn broke that he concluded his vigil in place of the girl.

Yet here, even with blue-yellow light peeking out of the horizon, the snow does not weaken or cease. And when it seemed like the whole world would be buried in white, he finally started to make his way home, each step a crunch of snow crust underfoot. The black umbrella sways in the long path, the boy holding it aloft the sole shadow that plies the way. In the midst of white winter, the black-clad figure is the only thing that contrasts the day. And it sways slowly, shuffling from side to side with each step, until alone, it becomes difficult to spot. There is no loneliness that darkens his step, and the boy does not stop on the path.

All is as it was before, as it was four years ago, when he met her for the first time in this path. Two lone figures, sharing a solitary road, their souls cold and sweet and tinged with the songs of winter.

